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The James Jones Literary Society is pleased to announce that the generosity of an anonymous donor has made it possible for the Society to name two $2500 winners, this year only, for the annual First Novel Fellowship.

The winners of the 1995 fellowships are Rick Bass, for his novel-in-progress *Where the Sea Used to Be;* and Tanuja Desai, for her collection of related stories, *Tale of a Two-Hearted Tiger.* The winners accepted their awards at the annual James Jones Symposium in Robinson, Illinois, on October 14, 1995.

At this year's Symposium, the Society officially changed its name to The James Jones Literary Society.

For guidelines for the 1996 First Novel Fellowship, send a SASE to:

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C/O Chairperson
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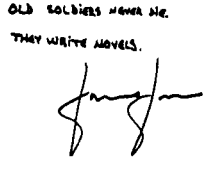

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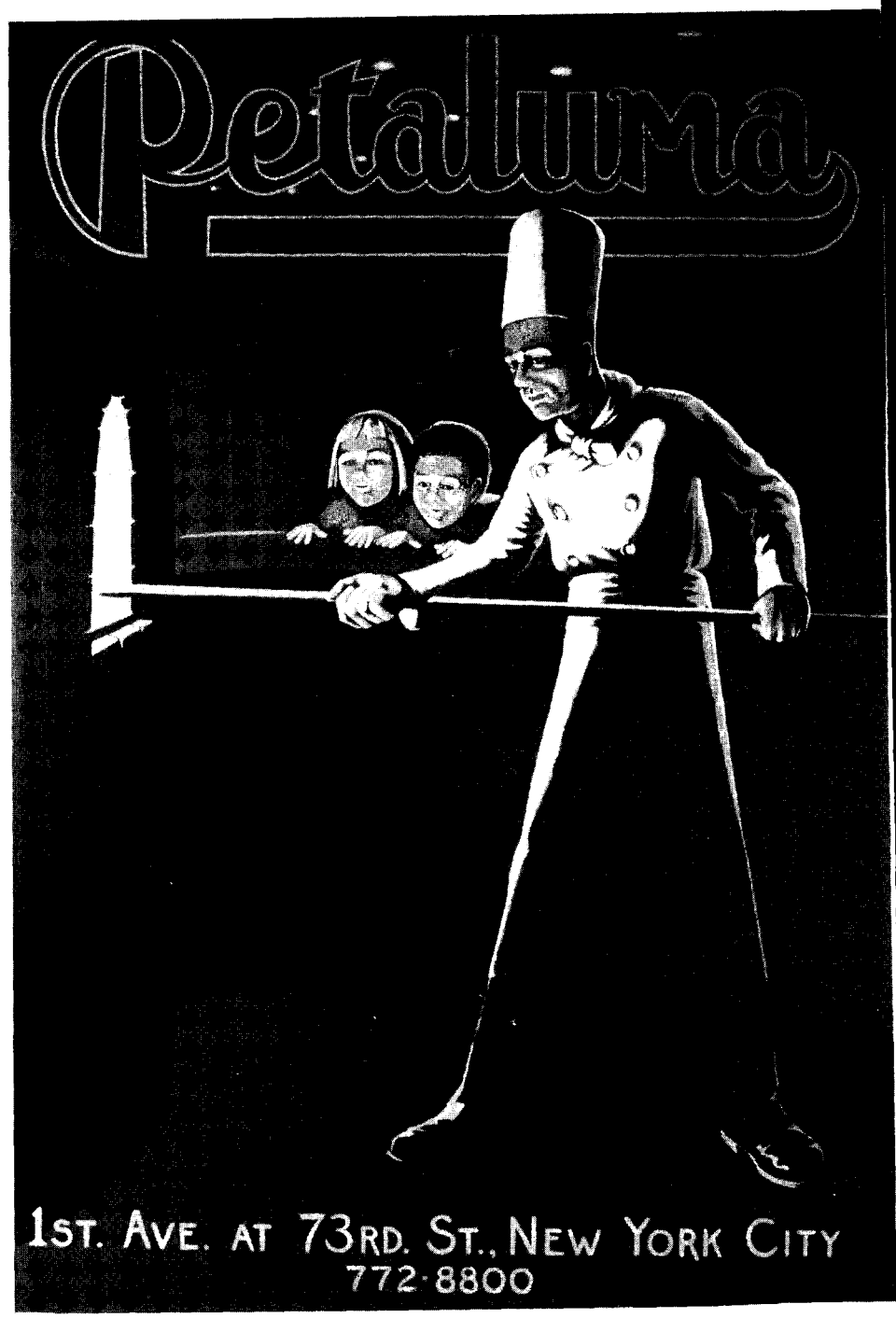

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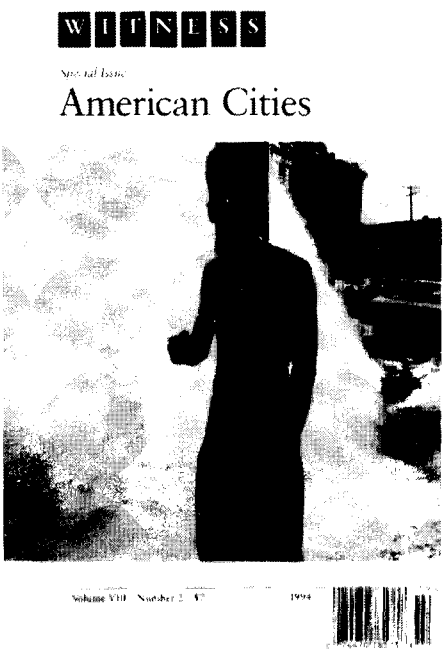

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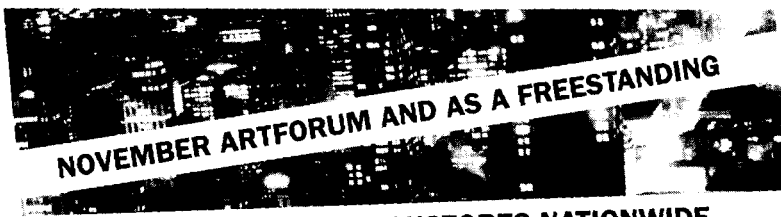

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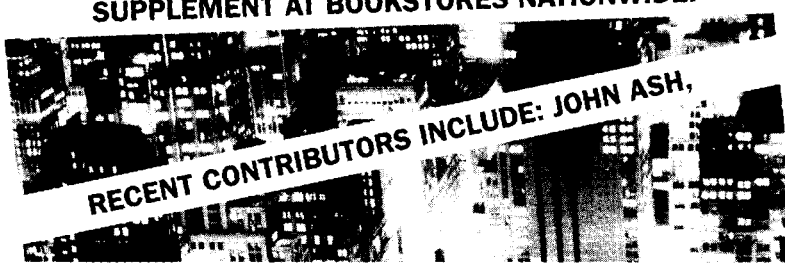

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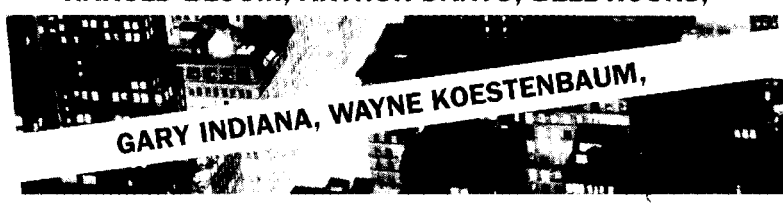

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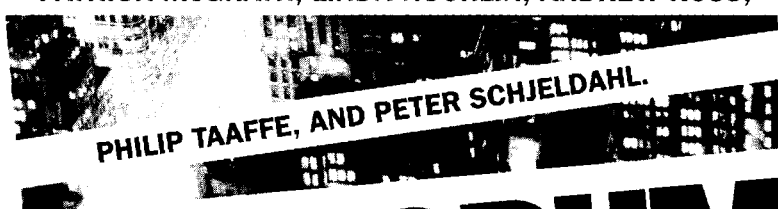

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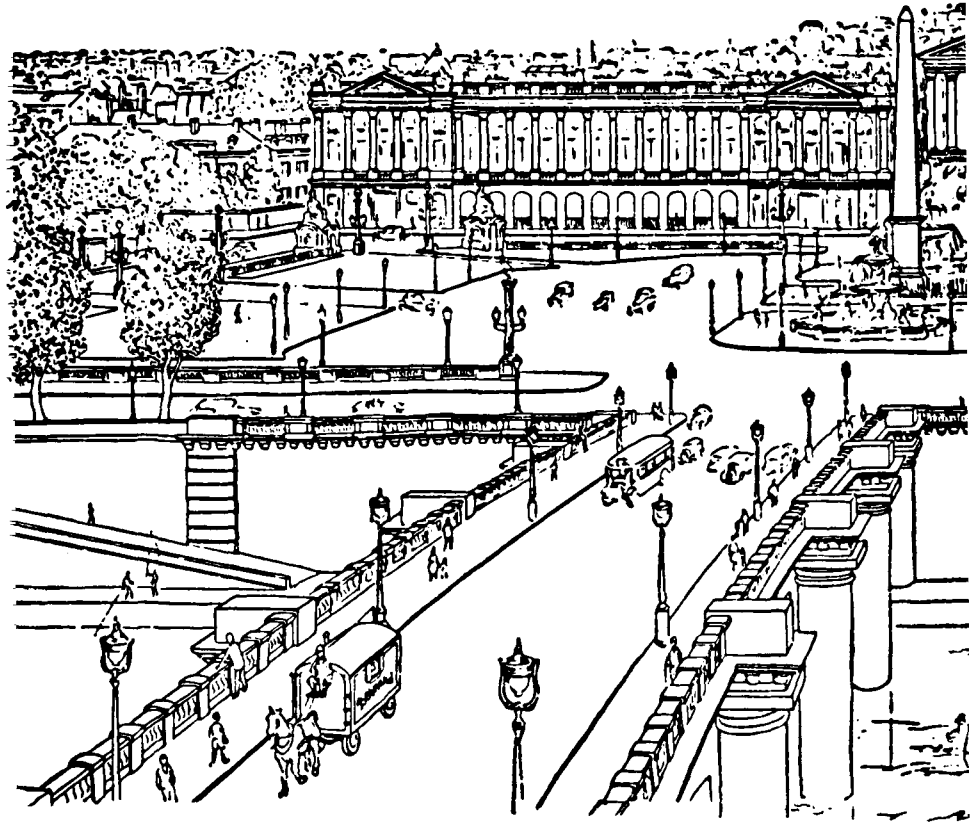

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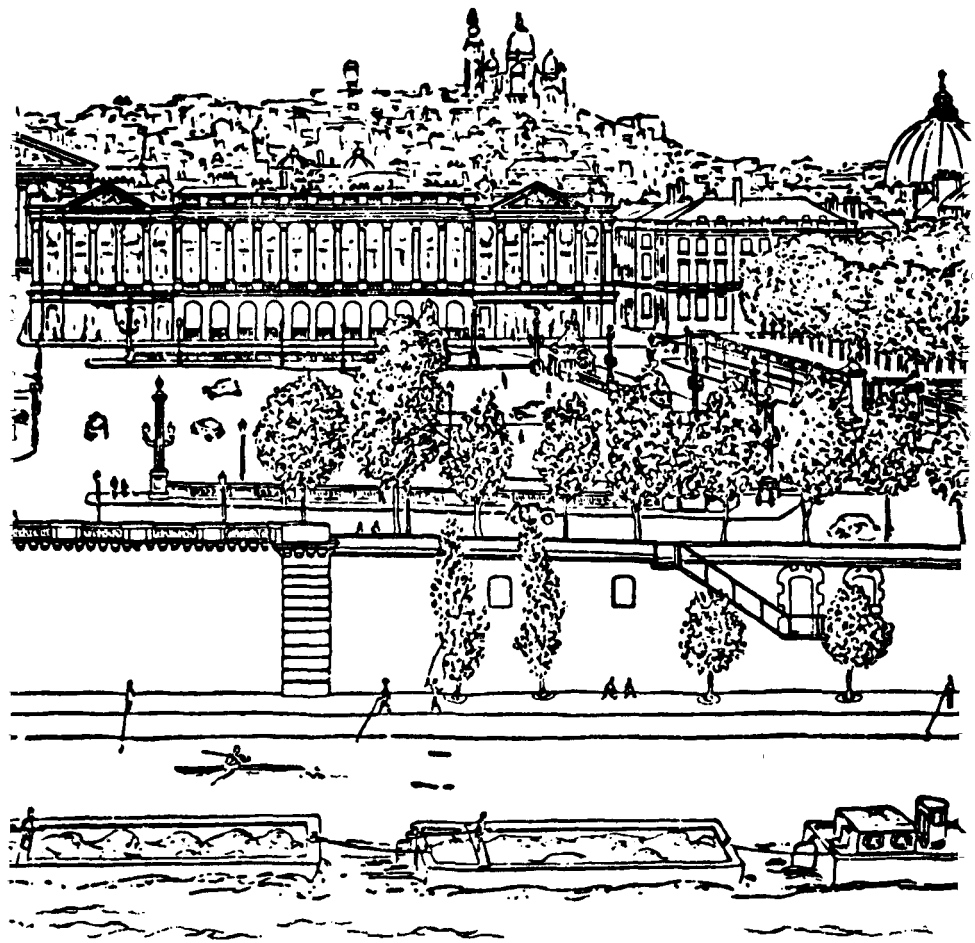

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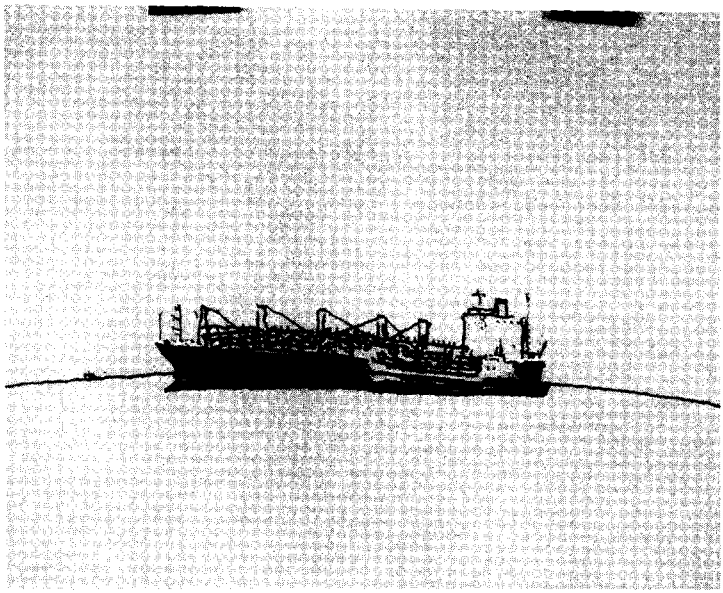

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Two Deer

Rick Bass

The first deer went through the ice when I was out in the barn working. It was January. Martha came running out of the cabin to tell me. She saw it all.

I grabbed a rope and went running down to the lake. The deer, a doe, had gone out onto the new ice, all the way to the middle, and had crashed through. It was twenty below and supposed to get colder. The deer had punched a car-sized hole in the center and was swimming in circles, flailing and trying to pull herself up onto the ice with her black shiny hooves. She would work her front legs up and prop herself up on the ice that way, like a woman resting her elbows at a table, and then she would kick and thrash, trying to pull herself back up, but would crash through new ice and slide back into the water. Then she would resume swimming in circles, panicked.

I hurried out onto the ice. The ice cracked under my feet; I slowed down. I knew my wife was watching from the window and I could feel her thinking, *stupid*, *stupid*, as I went out across that ice. We had a new baby.

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The doe's eyes widened. She swam harder, certain that I was coming to leap on her back and bite her neck. The ice was making splintering sounds, so I got down on all fours and crept closer. I was almost close enough to throw the rope.

One knee punched through the ice, sinking my leg to mid-thigh. I lay spread-eagled to keep from punching through any deeper. Cold water swirled around my chest. I could feel the cake of ice I was lying on breaking away from the rest; it began to bob and float, and then sink. I figured I was going down, and it was a sour feeling to realize Martha and the baby were watching me. I hoped they weren't filming me; we had gotten a new video camera because of the baby, and Martha was always filming everything. It would be a stupid death, and captured on tape.

I rolled onto my back—water rushing all around me—and wriggled backward from the floating ice onto the firmer shelf ice behind me, sliding backward, away from the hole in the ice, away from the thing I was trying to save.

The deer was, I'm sure, wondering only if it would go under or be leapt upon.

•

The second deer leaped in front of my headlights in March. Another doe, it just came sailing up over a snowbank in full leap. Her feet never touched the road. I slammed on the brakes and tried to swerve but hit her in mid-flight, as if she were a bird. The truck struck her left shoulder and knocked her into the snowbank.

I stopped the truck and got out and picked up her limp body, and loaded her into the back of the truck with my dogs. She was heavy, and I had to wonder if she were pregnant from back in the fall, from the wild rut that goes on in November—deer chasing each other all over the place, a carnival of deer breeding.

The day before I hit the doe had been the first mild day since winter, the first one where you could feel the sun again, and I'd noticed all the animals walking around slowly, blinking

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and standing out in meadows as if marveling that such things as sun and grass, and open ground, existed.

This deer had eluded starvation, coyotes and lions, had survived the long hard winter, and now I had snuffed her out, here on the cusp of spring. All of that brave suffering had been for nothing.

My dogs were in the back of the truck with her. It was just into nightfall—seven o'clock. The dogs were excited at first by the deer being in the back of the truck with them, excited by the animal's largeness and by the scent of blood, but once we started down the road they calmed down, and by the time we got to the cabin those two sweet hounds had moved over next to the deer and were lying with their heads resting on her shoulder and flanks, keeping her warm. I saw with some surprise that the deer had her head up and was looking around, as alive as a lamb.

I whistled the dogs out and shined a light on the deer—she had just a little bump on her head—and I left the tailgate open, hoping she would jump out and run back into the woods. It was a clear night with stars, so later I crept out and laid a heavy blanket over her. I kept checking on her through the night.

Gradually her head went lower and lower, though, and her breathing grew more ragged. She began to cough, and in the morning she was dead, stiff and blue-eyed, no longer a deer.

I pulled her out of the truck and took her behind the barn and cleaned her. I was slightly sickened to discover upon gutting her that her shoulder was shattered hopelessly and that her stomach lining had ruptured, so all of her intestines and other organs (except for the heart) had slid down into the lower half of her body. It was a terrible mess. And she'd just been holding her head up like nothing was wrong, nothing was different. It was dumb to think she could've been all right. I could scarcely believe, looking at her, my childish hopes of the night before—that she might hop down out of the truck and go back off into the woods, and survive, even prosper. I cleaned her and hung her in the barn to age for five days.

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•

The third deer ran through my yard the very next day. I was in the barn trying to work, huddled over a quickly cooling cup of coffee, and I heard the dogs barking the way they do when they see coyotes. They were snarling and barking—Ann howling like a wolf—and I jumped up and ran out into the snow, nearly colliding with this deer, which was bounding through the deep drifts.

A big coyote was right on its tail, and we all arrived at the same place at the same time. My dogs were chasing the coyote as it chased the deer.

The coyote stopped in his tracks when he saw me, but the deer kept going. The coyote whirled and ran in the opposite direction. The dogs chased him a short distance, then turned and trotted back.

I felt like I'd saved that deer, which helped dull the guilt I'd been feeling about that other deer, but it wasn't an altogether clean trade, because I knew that coyotes had to eat. I had saved the deer, but had messed up the coyote.

•

Our lives move deeper and slower—as if they are taking on weight. It's good weight, most of it, but it alarms us, I think, at the way it feels like that added weight tries to sink us. I think it alarms Martha a lot.

It's like sinking through snow up to your ankles, or deeper. It's like not being sure, one day, that the ice will hold you—when every day before, it has. It may be my imagination, but it seems like Martha doesn't want to talk about this—that this accrual of weight is happening. As if she believes that any day now—tomorrow, for instance—things will begin to get lighter and freer again—even if she would admit to this weight-gathering occurring in the first place.

I know she can feel it. She says all things are cyclic, and they are, but this thing—us—is somehow different.

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The things outside of us seem never to change, beyond the constancy of the four seasons—birth, life, death, rebirth—but I'm convinced that our lives are different, just a bit above or below these constant cycles. As if we are on some march through the woods toward those final cycles, toward some final, newer place.

But Martha won't hear any of this kind of talk. She says it's all the same. She says nothing's changing. And still: despite the endlessness of the days, and the seeming strength of our continuity, there are fractures and gaps, where whole chunks of time will fall away—as if calving away from the whole, too weak to stay fastened to the core. Things that were assumed to be lock-solid, rock-sure, fall away, leaving only loss, emptiness and confusion.

And we start anew.

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The thing that gets the deer in these woods most of the time is the wolves. There's usually just one pack at a time in this little valley. They keep the deer pruned back real nice and light, real healthy. We've got some great trophy deer here, as a result. None of our deer have ticks, or other parasites. Nature's still all working the way it's supposed to, up here.

There are a lot of coyotes, too, but if the wolves find the coyotes in their territory, they kill the hell out of them as well, viewing the coyotes as competitors. We've seen a hunting group of four wolves chase a pack of over a dozen coyotes across a meadow, routing them.

Coyotes hunt the same prey as wolves, but use a different style. The coyotes aren't as efficient as the wolves—a lot of times they'll try just to injure a deer, then stay with or near it for days, waiting for it to succumb—whereas the wolves just pretty much go after what they want, and either get it or don't. And if they get it, they get all of it. They'll eat almost everything—85 percent, 90 percent, sometimes 100 percent of the kill—bones, hooves, hide, everything. As if the thing never was.

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Our slow days around the cabin. Me cutting some firewood to sell, or building rock walls for the neighbors; in the late summer, canning fruit and making jam. The heat almost unbearable, boiling water on the woodstove, with which to sterilize the fruit jars. Huckleberries from the woods, and strawberries from the garden. Sweat pouring down both of us. Adding half a bag of sugar to the whole vat. Pouring it steaming into the jars, and sealing them, and then waiting for the lids to *pop!*, indicating they'd swelled to a perfect tight seal. The sweat veeing down our chests and backs; the crackle of the fire in the woodstove, and the baby asleep in the bedroom. Martha and I slipping down to the pond and undressing, and going for a swim to clean off. Making love in the pond—too hot out in the sun—and then climbing up onto the bank to dry in the faintest of breezes—late August, September—and no sound in the world, other than the silence of the baby sleeping, and the faintest leaf clatter of the aspens—the sound of a cloud—and the soothing *pop* of each fruit jar.

Winter at full arm's length: coming, but still a full arm's length away. Dry brown grasses drying in the sun; our lazy arms around each other, our milky skin. A ninety-day growing season.

•

That deer that I struck with the truck, and carried home, the one that I hung out in the barn: on the fifth day of aging it, I went out to butcher her. I'd been walking past to check her every day—to make sure the coyotes hadn't gotten her. And every day when I'd gone by, the deer had been untouched. The doe had been hanging there the same as I'd left her, with her back to me, neck outstretched by the rope, hanging from the rafters with all four legs drooping at her sides, drawn by gravity.

I'd assumed she was all still there, and I'd begun to look forward to the meat. I was going camping and was looking

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forward to baking the two big glistening red loins in the coals of a campfire, and was going to marinate the red strips of the backstrap.

I went into the barn with the butcher knife, but when I swung the doe around to begin skinning the hide, the carcass felt as light as a coat on a coat hanger, and as I spun her to face me I saw that there was only a skeleton beneath the hide, that the coyote had gotten into the barn and had eaten the meat off of her hindquarters, had eaten out all of the butt steaks, had eaten up into the carcass as far as it could reach—standing on its hind legs to do so, I was sure—eating all the way up to the bottom half of the backstrap, so that only the shoulders and neck were left untouched. I was stunned, and ashamed. I thought I knew better. You can't keep a coyote away from meat. It'll get it—whatever it takes, it'll get it, just like the wolves.

•

Martha studied whitetails in college, got her doctorate in ungulate nutrition, specialized in winter range requirements. We used to talk about deer all the time—about almost nothing but deer. The bucks we'd seen. When we thought the fawns would drop. When the rut would start: that one week of the year when the bucks run wild, dashing through the forest day and night looking for does to breed, intent upon only one thing. Totally unaware of their mortality. Road-hunters cruising the snowy lanes in big trucks, knocking down the bucks as the bucks run right past them, ignoring the trucks, ignoring everything but the sweet scent of deer vulva and buck jism, which has always reminded me of the holidays.

Roadside gut piles and gleaming red carcasses left behind then, and coyotes slipping out of the woods to join in the feast, and ravens cawing all over the valley in what can only be called pagan glee, swooping in and out of the trees with gobbets of red flesh dangling from their beaks, and the snow coming down, sealing off the old world and making the new one, the clean white beautiful one . . .

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Martha and I had met in college. I was studying civil engineering at a small school in northern Utah. I'd gone there for the skiing. I was going to learn how to build roads into the forest. I was eighteen years old; what did I know better?

Martha was eighteen. She explained to me that what I was doing was bad, that road building in the West destroyed the last pieces of wilderness, fragmented the last sanctuaries where the wild things—the bears and the wolverines, caribou and great gray owls—holed up and hid out from man's hungry, clumsy, stupid ways.

She told me that we had too many roads already; that the mountains and all wilderness were disappearing beneath concrete, and that what I needed to be learning to do instead was to tear up old roads and plant trees in their place.

It took me about two weeks to change my major. And I have to say it probably wasn't her passionate defense of centuries-old forests falling to bulldozers, or soil sloughing into pristine brooks. It was her ass that converted me.

But it's not like I followed her like a puppy; I steered clear of her wildlife science classes, her ecofeminist curriculum. I changed to literature. When she went out on her wolf howlings (thirty fucking below, in January), I usually stayed in town, at the library. I would read a life, while she lived one.

This isn't to say we weren't in love. We were; as much as any two young people are capable of, which is to say, a lot. Our differences—the way she was so outgoing, the way her energy poured out of her, like water over a spillway, and the way I held mine all in—these differences formed a lock on us, the way deer and wolves fit together in the woods: one's movements always affecting the other's.

•

What I did with that first deer—the one that fell through the ice in January—was run back to my cabin and dig my canoe out from under the snowdrifts.

Drenching wet, with my clothes starting to freeze in that clanking wind, I dragged the canoe down to the lake and slid

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it onto the ice. I sledded it out to where the ice began to crack and splinter, and then I got in the canoe, and like a Russian ice-breaker, began to smash the ice with my paddle.

The deer's eyes rolled wild as I smashed the ice with my paddle, and I sledged my canoe, a foot at a time, closer.

Finally I had the canoe off the ice and out into the open water, the cold black water. I canoed right up to the swimming deer—the deer so cold, and tired—and slipped the noose over its head. I hauled it up out of the water and into the canoe with me. It scrambled, trying to leap free, but I gripped the rope tight and held on.

With my free arm I paddled us back in the ice-breaking lane I'd plowed on my way out—a lane just wide enough to slip a canoe into.

Once on shore, I pulled the deer out of the canoe and put it over my shoulders. I carried it up the mountain and then turned it loose deep in the woods, in a cedar jungle where I knew there were neither wolves nor coyotes—too thick and tangly for them. I watched the deer run off. The ice had frozen into a glass coat around the deer, and as the deer ran, the ice shattered and tinkled. It was like a kind of miracle.

•

I remember driving through town one day, the whole family—a shopping trip, a day to make the long haul for groceries and to see a movie. It was in the winter, and too far to drive all the way back that night; we'd gotten a hotel room in town, and would head back the next day, up over the snowy pass—Martha and me and the baby.

It was right around Christmas. The lights were twinkling, and streamers and banners were draped across Main Street. There were snow-flecked wreaths on the doors of all the businesses. We were coming back from the movie theater when we saw a hunter driving home with a dead deer strapped to the hood of his car. He was doing it mostly to show off: just cruising the main drag. The clank of tire chains on the snowy road. Smoke rising from everyone's chimneys.

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There was no need to be parading that thing around. The guy was just being an asshole.

Still, it was a big deer. It's possible it was some kind of record deer—some kind of trophy.

The guy pulled over in front of the Chevrolet dealership and got out and stretched: an awkward excuse for people to stop and ask him about that big deer—to comment upon his prowess, etcetera.

We walked over to look. It was going to be some kind of record. Snow was falling. Everything was real nice and quiet. There was that nice hush, the sense of community, of seasons and change and closure, that always comes near the end of deer season in the West, in the mountains: the way autumn gives itself up to winter.

But this deer wasn't ready for any of that. No spirit mumbo jumbo, no ghostly wraith-of-the-forest relinquishing itself back to the spirit of the wild; nor was there was to be any edification of the sense of the rural community and its place in the hunting-and-gathering cycle of things on the account of *this* deer, this snowy night, because this deer wasn't dead. It was just knocked out.

The hunter had knocked him down, aiming for a heart-and-lung shot to keep from spoiling the trophy head, but out in the woods (he was telling us all this) the deer had jumped up again and charged him. The hunter had fired a second shot from the hip, striking the deer in the skull, dropping it instantly. Miraculously, the second shot didn't even break the skull or shatter the antlers.

That had been at dusk. The hunter had started to field dress the deer, but it had gotten dark, and the hunter had decided to do all that in town. Wanted to get his picture taken with a whole, clean deer, not some diminished, bloodstained, gutted thing.

The cold ride off the mountain had revived the giant deer, however. The concussion wore off as we were all standing around admiring it. The great buck lifted his head like some European stag and started kicking and thrashing. It slipped out of the ropes that had it fastened to the hood. It slid off

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the hood and bounded down the street. It ran down the sidewalk and past the bank. The electronic sign on the bank building said 7:03, and eight degrees.

The hunter looked as if he'd just had his own guts pulled out. I thought he was going to howl. The baby started laughing and pointing in the direction the deer had gone.

The tracks were easy to follow in the new snow. The hunter grabbed his rifle and started after the deer. The hole in the deer's side had opened again and was leaving glittering drops of crystalline blood, crimson as berries, which were already starting to freeze. It was just a little blood that the deer was leaking, but it would open up and bleed more as he kept running.

I knew this. The hunter knew this. We all knew it. Sometimes we know the language of deer as well as we know each other.

We all followed the hunter at a trot—the crowd of us like a posse: men, women and children.

It was as if the deer belonged to the whole community. It was a sense of loss for all of us when that deer leaped up and ran away. Only the baby was laughing. Her cheeks were rosy-red from the cold. She was clapping her mittens as we trotted along behind the hunter.

"How old is she?" one woman asked Martha as she ran alongside us.

The deer ran as if it knew where it was going; as if it had been in town before. It ran in a straight line, north, as if heading for the train station. Close to the mill, and close to the river.

The deer was starting to bleed more. We tracked it down to the end of Main Street and past the train station, across the railroad tracks and into the brush. It was headed for water, as any wounded animal will do.

Someone had a flashlight and turned it on as we hurried through the brush. Cold alder branches popped us. A few of the posse turned back, then: they had supper to cook, or bowling practice that night. Only about half a dozen of us

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kept on, having a strong interest in the way things would turn out.

The deer was losing more blood. How much blood did it have?

We found where the deer had slipped and had tried to rest for a moment, but it must have gotten back up when it heard us coming. If it had been my deer I wouldn't have pushed it so hard, would have let it go off and lie down to rest and die in peace, and then I would track it; but it wasn't my deer.

He was going to push it all the way to the river.

There was no way the deer would be able to swim the river. The current was too fast, and the water too deep.

The tracks went straight out across the gravel bar—disappearing into the dark river.

"He's in heaven now," a woman said. We were all breathing jets of silver puff clouds. The mill's whistle moaned for the day shift to get off.

"He was *real*," the hunter said, near tears. He turned to us. The black river behind him seemed to stretch forever, laughing, now that that warm deer was in its cold belly.

"Did you all see it?" the hunter asked. He lifted his rifle, brandished it. "I want you all to know I shot that deer," he cried. "I did it, I was the one. For a while, I had it lashed to the hood of my car," he said. "*Me*."

Most of us looked away, disgusted. Maybe he had put a wound on that big old deer, and he'd probably even killed it—and maybe it was a record of some kind—but he'd lost it, too, and it's a sin to waste meat.

"Shit," said the woman who'd told us the deer was in heaven, "that doesn't count for *fuck*. I used to be in love with my husband, too—my ex—but *used to* doesn't count for shit."

A hunter in Idaho, seventy miles downstream, saw the icy corpse go floating by and retrieved it—lassoed it and dragged it in. He built a fire and thawed it out, took the carcass in to be measured, and it was true, it was the third-largest whitetail ever shot, but he wouldn't give the deer back, so nobody got the record. We saw the picture of it in the paper.

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There were some among us who believed the deer had not drowned when it hit the water, but had somehow swum that whole seventy miles, and *then* had drowned. In the long run it doesn't really matter, the deer's dead, but I'm one of the ones who believes he almost made it: that he swam that frigid river with his head, and that huge rack, out of water, plumes of ice-rime ghosting from his nose, swimming under the lonely cold night; swimming for his life, his head held high: and he almost made it; almost.

•

We live in one of those places I did not build a road into. A place of wildness and mystery. Our little girl looks out the window on a winter morning and watches a family of otters playing on the river ice. There are elk outside the kitchen, looking in the kitchen window, like missionaries who've come to visit. In my dreams, I think of our bodies as being the color of flames, because for half the year, it's so cold that that's the only place we can make love: in front of the fire, so that our writhing bodies take on the color of the fire itself. The skin at the ends of our fingers splits and cracks from the dryness of the strange cold. Our eyelashes sheet with frost when we go outside to ski or snowshoe. Ravens float above us when we ski, as if lonely for company in the huge silences of winter.

We're shifting. I tend to be the effusive one now, prone to gushes of euphoria followed by torrents of despair, while Martha seems to have reversed and become the sane one, the steady one, the wise one.

The country behind us, through which we have traveled, and through which I don't guess we'll be traveling again: that's how Martha was, and how I was. I can see it now, lying slightly below us.

•

Martha loves, like so many of us, the big predators, which are generally much more intelligent than their prey: the

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wolves, bears and lions. She says that hunting is "the primary act of evolution that has most shaped the organic body we call intelligence." That's how she's always talked, and I've gotten used to it. Her language, in its own way, carries just as much passion as that of a poet's. It's just that her passion's hidden behind those awful words (*evolution*, and *organic body of intelligence*). It's all held in. She'll lay something like that on me, and I'll say, "Oh, you mean the predators have evolved larger brains to hold all the different data, all the possibilities they need to factor in to hunt with—the wind, slope gradient, temperature, soil conditions, sun's angle, moon's phase and all of the other invisible things that are the very beat, the very pulse of the earth's skin itself?" And then she'll think I'm making fun of her.

Or she used to think that. But now she's becoming less and less interested in her science, and more tolerant of mystery.

She hasn't learned it—mystery—from me. I think she has learned it from the deer, and the woods.

And I—for the first time—want to know a few answers, a little science. Like, *What is going on? Where is it all going to end? What are our lives going to be like, from here on out?* I'd like a little direction for once, a little glow at the end of the tunnel.

•

So many things can end a deer's existence. Not just the obvious causes—predation—but also starvation, malnutrition, liver flukes, worms. Smaller things, a series of events that lead to a gradual deterioration in the deer's well-being—a series of mistakes, or harshnessess of nature, are generally what lead to the end of the line. But it's all part of a flow. I see that, living up here in the mountains; I see it in the ways of deer, and in the ways of the seasons, and I see it in us, too. It's neither good nor bad; it just *is*.

•

Martha's doctorate work included studies about the nutrition a deer needs when the going gets really rough. She would

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measure cell-wall content of forbs as a percentage of dry matter; would measure lignocellulose content, and nitrogen from dead vegetation in winter, and she would formulate digestibility factors for the deer. The rains of fall and snows of winter degrade the cell walls and leach nitrogen from the plant tissues. I like to think of it as the land taking back those elements which it had loaned to the deer for the summer, for the joy of that quick life. Martha's old technical papers tend to express it a bit more dryly.

"Calcium has a large role in blood clotting as well as maintaining neuromuscular excitabilities and in the acid-base equilibrium of the body. Dietary calcium at a level of 0.40% of dietary dry matter in the presence of 0.25–0.28% phosphorous is adequate for postweaning fawns. Chlorine occurs in body fluids, where it helps regulate osmotic pressure and maintain tissue pH levels. . . ."

I want to know about the mystery of it, not the fucking pH of it. Now I want to know about the roadless areas.

•

She used to do autopsies on winter-killed deer that people would bring in to the university. Some were obvious: the brittle bones of selenium deficiency, or the puncture marks in the neck from coyotes' teeth. But others, so many others, were unanswerable; there appeared to be no reason for the deer's demise. They had just stopped living. It was as if there were something out there that could not be measured; a thing which they needed, but had run out of.

•

I remember the year Martha said she didn't love me any more. The baby was seven. The baby is a genius, we think. We knew it even then. She learned to read by the time she was three, and could also tell the difference between a buck track and a doe track. She's an utter joy to be around. She, as much as the landscape around us, and in which we live,

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reminds us to love one another. But that year that Martha flat out told me she didn't love me anymore—that was a tough one. I suppose in their own way, each year is tough, just as each of them is beautiful, but we didn't know what to do about that one.

You can't manufacture love: you can't build it back up like a fire. You start out with a certain amount, and then hope it is strong enough and lasting enough to sustain itself against the hard winters and the assault of time. And it changes; it fluctuates—it either gets stronger or weaker. And sometimes all of the center can just go out. That core, that base, can just get cold, and stay cold, for too long. It's one of the dangers.

It got right down to the very end. I was going to leave. It was as if my guts were open: as if ravens and eagles were already feeding on my heart. Still, I was going to let her—them—go. Off to that new direction in life that would not include me any more.

But we muscled through it; somehow we got back into love, or were perhaps carried back into it, unconscious, on a sled, as if pulled through the night by some higher being. The spring came, and we were still alive, and when the woods and meadows turned green again, we started to love each other again.

A harsh winter like that one never came back. Or has not, yet.

•

Martha and I went on a field trip, once, up the North Fork of the Whiteflesh River, in northern Montana, right where the country crosses over into Canada. It was for a wolf-study project that Martha's class was doing. We were supposed to follow a thirteen-mile transect due north and count how many moose, how many deer, how many elk. We were supposed to howl every four hundred meters and count the wolves that responded.

It was on Thanksgiving Day; it had snowed hard the day before, two feet, and then dropped to twenty below.

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We had to cross the river naked, holding our clothes over our head to keep them dry, and then build a warming fire on the other side of the river. It was madness and euphoria.

It was so beautiful. The salmon sky, snow clouds between us and the sun, cast a pearly reddish-goldish light on the whole day, as if we were in some new stage of heaven. All day long, there was a light on our faces almost like firelight. The snow was frozen hard in places, so that we could walk across it like concrete for two or three steps, but then we'd hit a soft or weak spot that our feet would punch through, and we'd collapse up to our waists. It was exhausting work. But we were so in love: *so in love*.

We came across a small pond back in the woods that was completely frozen. Wolf tracks led us to the pond, and to the dead deer that was out on the pond: nothing left to it more than a few bones. Even the ravens had finished with this carcass.

"That's how they do it," Martha explained. "The wolves try to get the deer out onto the ice where the deer will slip and go down, or will even punch a leg through the ice and get stuck.

"And then they move in—the wolves." She made a whistling sound, drew her finger across her throat. "And then it's over."

We examined the bare bones and the tracks of the wolves; the brushed-out areas of snow where the ravens' wing tips had swept across the snow. The pittery-pat markings of the coyotes who had come in to lick and crunch the bones after the wolves were through.

We continued north, then, into the beautiful day. The woods were ours. There was some undefinable essence out there that day, which seemed to shout, simply, in the name of every mountain and every river, every deer and every wolf, that Martha and I belonged together, under that odd lingering salmon sky. I have never forgotten that day, that feeling, and I still hold on to it.

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Because you love wolves or other predators, you have to study their food source, which is deer. It's like learning to play the piano before you learn to play any other kind of music. You must understand deer long before you can understand wolves, or anything else. I understand this, though still, it strikes me as odd, mysterious.

It seems like trying to say "I love you" without using the word *love*. It's like trying to say, "It doesn't matter how much you change, or I change, we will always be in this country together, and whatever changes come, whatever mystery, will be as wonderful and scary as they have always been."

It's like trying to say, "Let's don't let each other become small or weak or diminished." It's like saying, "There will always be some amount of ice beneath us."

It's like saying, "We must go on, I love you, there is no choice."

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Vijay Seshadri

Lifeline

As soon as he realized he was lost, that
in kicking around his new job in his head,
the new people he'd met, and how
he could manage a week in Seaside,
he'd stumbled past the muddy fork of road
that slithered down in switchbacks
to Highway 20, and now couldn't tell,
through rainclouds coarse as pig iron,
and about as cold, which languished
over each of the scarred mountaintops,
where west was, or east, or north,
or feel the sun's direction,
he stopped, as he knew he should,
and doubled back. An hour at the worst
would bring him to the International
inert in a ditch with its radiator
punctured, its axle broken, and blood
from his temple on the steering wheel.
He wished he'd never set eyes on that truck . . .
here he was, trudging like an idiot
through a thousand-square-mile dead spot
of Douglas fir, soaked to the bone
and hungry, with his head throbbing.
He wasn't up to this, he said to himself,
staring disconsolately outward
to the numberless ridges and valleys, singed
with the bitter green of the firs.
But why hadn't he reached the truck yet,
or at least somewhere familiar,
where he could get his bearings again?
He didn't recognize the ridge he was on.

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He'd never seen this particular patch—
glinting with wild crocus prongs—
of clear-cut ground, torched and scarified.
Should he keep going, or return again?
There and then he made his third mistake.
Hearing, or thinking he heard,
deep in the valley below him plunged
in mist, a chain saw start and sputter,
he made off down toward the sound.
It would be a gypo logger, scrounging
deadfall cedar for shake-bolt cords,
or a civilian with a twenty-dollar permit
to cut firewood for sale at a roadside stand.
Either way, he could get directions
and hitch home by dark. Hours later,
night found him in a hollow, shouting
until he was hoarse for someone, anyone.
The weekend was almost here, and no one
at work would miss him before Monday. . .
he lived alone, idiot, he lived alone
and couldn't count on a single person
to send out an alarm. Those first hours
he spent shivering under a lip of rock,
wide awake, startling at each furtive,
night-hunting animal sound, each flap
of the raptors in the branches overhead.
On the second day he lost his glasses.
It happened like this: As he struggled
over the cryptic terrain all morning—
terrain that would seem, if looked at
from high above, from a helicopter
or a plane flying low enough to pierce
the dense, lazy foliage of clouds,
created, finessed, meticulously contrived
to amaze, like a marvelous relief map
of papier-mâché, revealing its artifice only
in the improbable dramas of its contours,
its extravagant, unlikely colors—

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he had what amounted to a real insight.
All this was the brainchild of water.
Stretching back beyond the Pleistocene—
how many millions of years?—
imperial rain had traced without pity,
over and over again, its counter-image
on the newborn, jagged mountains
until the length of the coast had been
disciplined to a system on purpose designed
to irrigate and to nourish the soil.
He decided he'd follow the water down.
He'd use each widening tributary
like the rung of a ladder, to climb down
from his awful predicament, and soon
work his way to the ocean—though, of course,
long before that he'd run across people.
With this in mind, he came to a stream
heavy and brown with the spring runoff,
its embankment on his side steep
to the point of perpendicularity, thick
with brush, though on the other side
a crown of ferns tumbled gently down
to the next watershed. It seemed like
a good idea to cross, and farther on
he found a logged fir with a choker cable
still attached (it must have snapped
when they tried to yard the falled tree
to the road high above) straddling
the stream. A little more than halfway over
he slipped on the treacherous wood
and would have gone in but for the cable
which he lunged at just in time.
That was his lifeline, though flailing
to save himself, he knocked the glasses
from his head. Now they'd reach the sea
long before him, if he ever would.
He knelt down in the ferns, exhausted,
by fits growing determined never

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to leave that spot. They'd find his bones
fifty years from now, clothes and ID
rotted away, a trillium poking through
his ribcage, a cucumber vine trellised
by the seven sockets in his skull.
The play of the thin, unending drizzle
on the overlapping leaves he sank below,
on the bark of the impassive trees
looming around him, grew indistinguishable
from the pulse turning loud in his head.
The ugly bruise on his forehead throbbed.
There were rents and gashes everywhere
down the length of his rain gear, which
let the mist and the dampness in.
Beyond a scant dozen inches, the world
looked blurry, smeared bright, unattainable.
Nothing in his life, up until then
(and if this had been pointed out to him
he would have acknowledged pride in it),
suggested that anything resembling
a speculative turn of mind cannibalized
the adequate, rhythmic, progressive
movements of his thoughts and feelings.
But, still, as almost everyone does,
he'd occasionally had inklings, stirrings,
promptings, and strange intuitions
about something just beyond the radius
of his life—not divine, necessarily,
but what people meant when they referred
to such things—which gave to the least
of his actions its dream of complicity.
Now he recognized, with a shock
almost physical, that those inklings
were just the returning, reanimated echo
(on a different scale but similar
to the echo we sometimes hear in our skulls
which leads us to the uncanny feeling
that an experience we're having is one

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we've had before, at some other time—
but does anything ever repeat itself?)
of the vibrations his life made
bouncing off the things around him
sunk deep in their own being;
and that life, his life, blossoming now
in this daisy chain of accident and error,
was nothing more or less than what there was.
There was nothing hidden underneath this,
but it was small, so small, as the life
of his family was, his people, his species
among the other species—firs, owls,
plants whose names he didn't know—
all of them minute, and the earth itself,
its four billion plus years of life
just the faint, phosphorescent track
of a minute sea creature on an ocean
for the annihilating dimensions of which
words such as "infinite" and "eternal"
were ridiculous in their inadequacy.
He lay on his back inside the ferns
and listened to the rain's clepsydral ticking.
He tried to grasp—what was it?—
but it clattered away, that slight change
in the pressure binding thing to thing,
as when an upright sleeper shifts
just a little, imparting to his dreams
an entirely different train of meaning.
Beyond those clouds, the blue was there
which shaded to blackness, and beyond
that blackness the uncounted, terrifying
celestial entities hung suspended only
by the influence they had on one another.
And all of this was just a seed
inside a seed inside a seed. . . .
So that when, finally, late the next morning
he half-crawled out of the woods, and came
in time to a wire fence in a clearing,

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less than two feet high and decorated
with gleaming ceramic insulators,
which indicated that a mild current,
five volts at the most, ran through it
to keep the foraging animals off
the newly sown vegetable garden
enclosed inside its perimeter, and saw
beyond it the sprawl of the lawn,
the 4-by-4 parked in the driveway,
the Stars and Stripes on the flagpole,
and the house, he stopped paralyzed.
The wind was blowing northwest, the clouds
were breaking up under its steady persuasion,
but, try as he did, he couldn't will
himself to step lightly over that wire,
and cross the garden's sweet geometry,
and go up to the door and ask to be
fed and made warm and taken home.
By that small fence, he sat down and wept.

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Hermann Broch

questions at a centennial

Often, an author's centennial marks an occasion for honorific and critical certitude, for a more or less confident act of what Leavis called 'placement'. The case of Broch seems to me different. The mere fact of commemoration does say something valid about his stature, about his claims to serious response. Yet there is much about Broch's achievement, about the meanings for us of this achievement, which is problematic. All I want to do here is to test, in most summary fashion, some lines of approach to Broch and his writings if only to suggest that none is wholly satisfactory, that the ground for canonic clarity is elusive.

1. Hermann Broch was a reluctant writer, if we take writer in its common, secular sense. He began publishing fiction when he was forty (Lützeler's biography). But from the outset, it was not belles lettres, not even 'serious literature' he aimed for. It was a very particular amalgam of philosophic-epistemological exemplarity together with a distinctly didactic edge. The essay, the poem, the novel, the play (except in one or two instances of immediate material needand occasionality) was to be a good deal more than that. Several 'value-systems' - itself a cardinal notion in Broch - and traditions are at work in this programme of transcendent form.

1. The contrastive image or paradigm is that of the Dichter as opposed to the Schriftsteller or Sprachschöpfer.
The röle of that paradigm in German idealism.
Three ~~the~~ examples contemporary with Broch: Wittgenstein's
Heidegger's
Canetti's

for Broch, the Dichter is "one who knows ethically", whose perception and articulation of that perception is primarily a moral act in which the aesthetic component is only instrumental. The Dichter's knowing (antithetical to 'knowingness') is expressed through 'truth-functions', through representations which are, like the Adamic nominations, definitional of the Wesen of the thing, of the life-form, of the private or public situation narrated.

This, of course, is the conception at issue in The Death of Virgil.

The authentic writer-Dichter must work "sub specie aeternitatis et sub specie mortis...." in a "Zeit des ethischen Kunstwerks" which began, for the moderns, with Goethe. His is the turb "vom Pathos des Schönen" (the Hofmannsthal essay) to the "erkenntis des Daseins". (Improbably enough), it is in Joyce that Broch finds this ethical-transcendent cognition to be most manifest. The formulation, in the 1936 tribute to Joyce's fiftieth birthday is crucial. A Kosmogonie, fundamentally Platonic, unfolds behind the manifold comic realism of Ulysses. The novel is a Durchschnitt through the world and

> durch ein Ich, das zugleich das Ens und das Cogito ist, der Logos und das Leben zugleich, wieder zu Eins geworden, zu einer Simultaneität, in deren Einheit das Religiöse an sich aufschimmert.

2. A second strain of idealization, of abstention from the aesthetic, needs to be observed. It is that - itself far more pervasive and intricate than my remarks can suggest - of Broch's vestigial Judaism, of Broch's implication in emancipated central European Judaism and its catastrophic fate.

> a) The ambiguous relations between emancipated Judaism and the métier of the secular writer, an ambiguity, a motif of almost inevitable 'assimilation', graphic in the life and production of Heine.
>
> b) The Judaic bias towards the exact and the philosophic sciences, towards the eminent dignitas of Wissenschaft. Broch the mathematician, Broch the philosopher of science in the ambit of the Vienna Circle, Broch the social psychologist and analyst of the pathologies of political behaviour. Where it is truly

A manuscript page from an essay by George Steiner.

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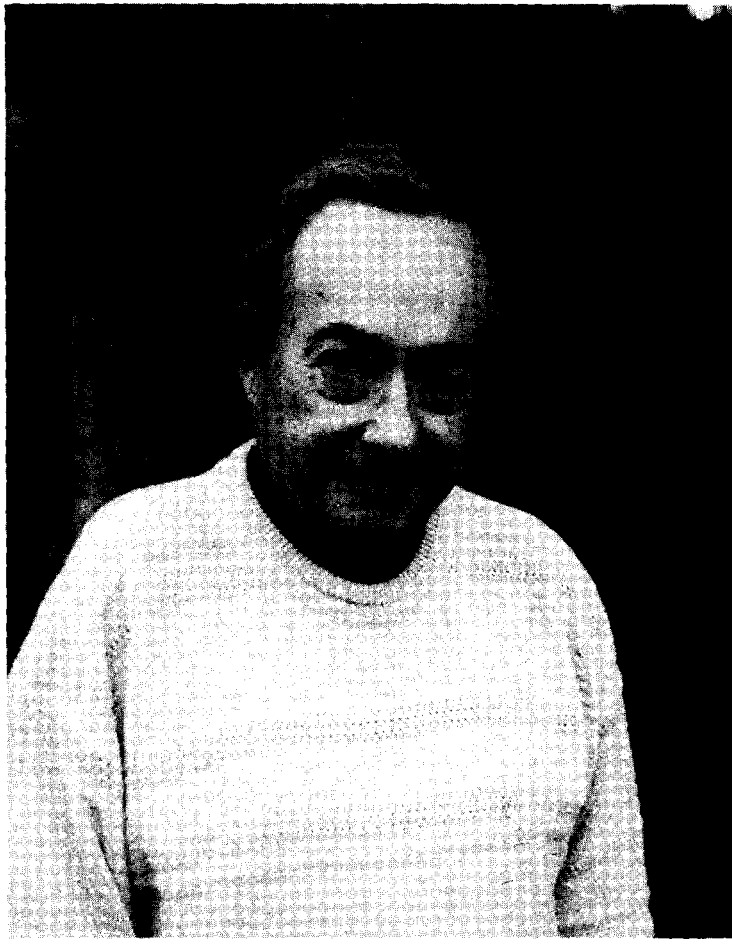

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George Steiner

The Art of Criticism II

This interview was conducted in the autumn of 1994, a few days before Steiner's induction as the first occupant of the Lord Weidenfeld Professorship of Comparative Literature at Oxford. Since this is the first chair in comparative literature

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at either Oxford or Cambridge, and since Steiner has always had a mixed – and often controversial – reception in England, his appointment was greeted with an explosion of interest from the British press, the main theme of which was the return of the prodigal.

Born in Paris to Viennese parents in 1929, Steiner came to the United States in 1940. He took his B.A. at the University of Chicago, his M.A. at Harvard, and his D. Phil. at Oxford, where, as he would wryly remind his audience at his inaugural address, the first version of his dissertation was rejected because it was too close to a field that Oxford did not teach in those days: comparative literature.

Steiner has taught at such American universities as Stanford, NYU and Princeton, but the main settings of his academic career have been England and Switzerland. At the University of Geneva he held the chair in comparative literature until his recent retirement. At Cambridge University he maintains his lifelong appointment as Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College. He now does brief teaching stints at various Italian universities and at Geneva.

The list of Steiner's books is characteristically long. It includes, among his literary, philosophical and cultural criticism, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky *(1959),* The Death of Tragedy *(1961),* Language and Silence *(1967),* Extraterritorial *(1971),* In Bluebeard's Castle *(1971),* Fields of Force: Fischer and Spassky in Reykjavik *(1973),* After Babel *(1975; rev. ed. 1992),* On Difficulty and Other Essays *(1978),* Martin Heidegger *(1978),* Antigones *(1984),* George Steiner: A Reader *(1984), and* Real Presences *(1989). In addition, Steiner has published three volumes of fiction:* Anno Domini: Three Stories *(1964), the novel* The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H. *(1981), and* Proofs and Three Parables *(1993). He has also edited (with Robert Fagles)* Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays *(1962) and* The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation *(1966). This summer Faber & Faber will publish a collection of fiction,* The Deeps of the Sea, *and a collection of essays,* No Passion Spent.

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Precisely because his background is so various and the range of his interests so broad, Steiner has never fit neatly into any of the current literary, intellectual or cultural categories. Translation, which has occupied him throughout his career, provides the best metaphor for his work: translation in the sense of moving across boundaries and borders, of moving from one field to another.

What is so strikingly characteristic of both Steiner and his work is that the intelligence is always embedded in his staggering range of learning and in his magnificent narrative instinct. Rarely, even when he is at his most speculative or theoretical, can Steiner resist an illustrative anecdote, and the delight he takes in telling stories is virtually physical.

Though Steiner has an extraordinary generosity of spirit, the legendary feistiness remains. He can be fiercely polemical; he loves a good argument, particulary with a worthy opponent and when the intellectual stakes are high.

The conversations took place both in Steiner's spacious modern office at Churchill College and in the living room of his home in Cambridge. On the bookshelves stand dozens of chess sets, reflecting one of his deepest passions, along with first editions of Heidegger and Kant, Coleridge and Byron. Dressed comfortably in a sweater and slacks, Steiner fawns over his Old English Sheepdog, Jemi, feeding her chocolate biscuits after dinner. All day the phone rings with well-wishers on the occasion of his Oxford appointment, Steiner moving effortlessly from English to German to French to Italian. In a few days more than a thousand people will crowd into the Renaissance hall at Oxford where Steiner will deliver his inaugural.

INTERVIEWER

You once referred to the "patience of apprehension" and "open-endedness of asking" which fiction can enact, and yet you have described your fictions as "allegories of argument, stagings of ideas." Do you still consider them to be "stagings of ideas"?

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GEORGE STEINER

Very much so. My writing of fiction comes under a very general heading of those teachers, critics, scholars who like to try their own hand once or twice in their lives. My early stories represent already an attempt to think about my central question. I think *The Portage of San Cristobel of AH* is more than that. That book may have a certain life. *Proofs* is another parable, an intellectual parable; but the speeches in *AH,* the parts of the novel that have really perhaps moved people, are also essays. I know that. They are statements of doctrine, of belief, of conviction, of questioning. The mystery whereby a creative artist somehow—we don't have an answer—generates a voice, a three-dimensional, ten-dimensional character who takes on independent life, has very little to do with pure intelligence or systematic, analytic powers. There are immensely intelligent novelists, God knows, and maybe Proust's was the most powerful mind of the century in some ways, cerebrally; but many are not that way at all. They can give no account of the spontaneous coming together within themselves and language of that genesis of the living, of that thing which walks in front of you so you forget the name of the author. That is genius, that is creativity, and I certainly don't have it. Two pages of Chekhov create for you a whole world and you never forget the voices. There they are. That is something very different, I think, from what somebody like myself can do.

INTERVIEWER

Is the role of ideas in fiction subordinate then?

STEINER

What a very difficult question you ask. There are novels that one would call great but that will live because of their ideological, intellectual content. A lot of Thomas Mann might strike one that way. Musil's *Man without Qualities* is written about by as many philosophers as literary critics. But this is rare. Don't ask anything like that of the most extraordinary fictive shaper—don't laugh at me—in our time, who is

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Georges Simenon. I can take from my shelf ten or twelve Maigrets and it doesn't take five or ten pages, as in Balzac, or twenty, as in Dickens (who is really slow in getting going; so is Balzac): Simenon does it in two or three paragraphs. There's a Maigret novel which opens with a loud noise. At three in the morning in Pigalle, the old Paris red-light district, a nightclub owner is pulling down the metal shade, to close up. Out of that single noise, focused against the first milk cart, focused against the steps of those who go home to sleep at that time and those who start coming into Les Halles to get the food ready for the day, Simenon gives you not only the city, not only something about France which no historian can surpass, but the two or three people who will matter in the story are already before you. Simenon somehow notes that the steps of the man who pulls down the shade, as they go away from the nightclub, have a curious hesitant drag. And there you are, that's the first important clue in the story. Now that is the *mysterium tremendum* of the creation of the autonomous persona. But yes, there can be ideology. I had the privilege of acquaintance with Arthur Koestler, and what wouldn't one have given to have written *Darkness at Noon*, one of the supreme acts of ideas. That seems to me a border case. It will probably continue to be read not for Gletkin and Rubashov as fictive characters but because of the extraordinary argument on Stalinism, on Marxism, on torture and horror: what is the nature of an ideological commitment unto death? What is the nature of lying in order to defend a good cause? But it is such a rich book. Koestler introduces just enough density of life and of being so that it is not a script of ideology.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to write more fiction?

STEINER

Yes, but I'm not up to the themes that move me most profoundly. I've been over and over tearing up the beginning of a story or a little novel on the following subject: we are either on a Greek island during the time of the colonels or

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in Turkey or South America: anywhere on earth, but in a police state. The man comes home to his wife and children, and this time as they go to bed, or at dinner, she *smells* the torturing on him (he's been torturing all afternoon). He never talks about it, there's never any open reference to what the job is, but the women know: they know they are sharing their beds with men who have done to the bodies of other men and women what these people do. The ultimate source is Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, about women refusing to sleep with their men until they stop fighting. But here it isn't that they won't sleep with them but that a terrible sickness begins to invade the act of love itself, and finally they begin murdering their husbands. Then there are the children: how do the children live with this knowledge of what their father does?

But this should be done by a master, which I'm not. I've kept trying to get it going and it gets shrill, stiff, abstract. A master would know just what to say about the dinner, about some small noise in the bedroom, and he'd have it going. He'd get you.

The other story I've been struggling with is on a much gentler subject. I watch the present crisis in marriage, especially as we live longer now. I've made detailed notes for a story in which a marriage turns into a deep friendship, but of course desire is gone and in a sense love is gone too because friendship is not the same thing as love. This turns around a sentence in a letter of Rilke to the wife he left very early and never really saw again: "Remember that in a good marriage one becomes the loving guardian of the other's solitude." What a fantastic sentence. I would love to develop that paradox: that the desire and vitality of marriage have a much better chance of surviving where there is deep hostility.

So these are the two subjects that I've been trotting and trotting around, but they need a real novelist, which I'm not.

INTERVIEWER

Now what about poetry? You used to write poetry.

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STEINER

Yes, I published at Oxford, in *Poetry* during its great days, even in *The Paris Review* itself. My French lycée education, which in some respects still resembled that of the nineteenth century, involved the constant learning by heart, the constant grammatical construal of Latin, then of Greek. This was all based on the assumption that a literate man—perhaps I should add *woman* but that would be cant: it was essentially masculine—can write verse. We were asked to imitate a famous Latin passage, finding our own Latin; then French: variations on a known theme in literature. You were expected to write verse that followed the strong structural forms and rules: the sonnet, the ode, the heroic couplet. Nobody expected you to have any spontaneous genius, but a craft, a *techne*, the Greek word which gives us our "technology" and "technique." It was an "accomplishment"—the word is nearly gone from our vocabulary now in this sense—like needlework or playing piano for young ladies, or like watercolors.

So I was trained that way and when I fully entered the English-language world I wrote poems, some of which were perhaps a tiny shade better than that. A few may have had a spark of private intensity and need, but on the whole they were verse, and the distance between verse and poetry is light-years. A first-rate poet ingests, internalizes all this knowledge, every bit of it, without even having to name it to himself. The relationship in a true poem between the set form and what we call the content is so organic that if you were to ask a real poet why the poem was an ode, why it was in free verse, why it was a dramatic monologue, he would say, "Don't be stupid. *Read* it! It cannot be otherwise."

Yet one mustn't be too romantic about this. Ben Jonson writes prose summaries and then produces some of the most magical lyrics in any language. Dryden and Pope work from prose into verse: some of their best verse is a heightened kind of prose. But certainly since the Romantics this isn't how we conceive of the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," in the Wordsworthian formula. The lycée education was the contrary: if you flowed over you wiped it up.

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INTERVIEWER

What happened to the tradition of the man of letters, which you alluded to earlier?

STEINER

It is under deep suspicion. Let's do a little history. The man of letters represented a kind of consensus of taste and of interest in his society. People wanted to hear about literature, the arts, from a cultivated nonspecialist. Macaulay, Hazlitt—the ranking men of letters—almost made a book of a review; they were that long. There was time for that kind of publication. The man of letters might also write poetry and fiction, or biography, and in England the tradition has not died. We still have Michael Holroyd, my own student Richard Holmes who is now so acclaimed, we have Cyril Connolly, Pritchard, who is an exquisite short-story writer, a constant critic, a constant reviewer. And I'm not one who sneers about J.B. Priestley. The people who sneer about Priestley would give their eyeteeth to have had a jot of his talent. Critic, biographer, memorialist, in many ways Robert Graves, who was such a fine poet, was a supreme man of letters.

Every one of my opponents, every one of my critics will tell you that I am a generalist spread far too thin in an age when this is not done anymore, when responsible knowledge is specialized knowledge. A review appeared of the first edition of *After Babel* by a very distinguished linguist, an old man now, still alive, and someone I respect very much: the high priest of the mandarins. "*After Babel* is a very bad book," it began, "but alas it is a classic." So I wrote this professor and said no review has ever honored me more, particularly the *alas*, which was wrung from him. I can live with that. Then he wrote me something very interesting. He said we have reached a point where no man can cover the whole field of the linguistics and poetics of translation. This book, he said, should have been written under your guidance by six or seven specialists. So I wrote back, "No it should not. It would then be wasted, and end up gathering dust on the technical shelves." I prefer the enormous risks. There were indeed errors, there were inaccura-

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cies, because a book that's worth living with is the act of one voice, the act of a passion, the act of a *persona*. We disagreed gently but deeply. He said no, that cannot be done. It could be done till the First World War, but from then on the self-splitting and fission of knowledge has become such, even in the humanities, that powerful minds spend a lifetime on getting their own specialty more or less right, let alone the landscape. So that's a very central disagreement. The man of letters—and what was George Orwell, if he was not a man of letters, what was Edmund Wilson, whom I succeeded on *The New Yorker* twenty-seven years ago?—the man of letters has become very suspect.

INTERVIEWER

Has the relationship, more generally, between literature and criticism altered?

STEINER

I think so. We could talk ten hours. I'm committed to the bitter passionate view that we live in a Byzantine period, an Alexandrian period, in which the commentator and the comment tower above the original. Saint-Beuve dies bitterly remarking, "No one will ever create a statue for a critic." Oh God, how wrong he was. Today we're told there is critical theory, that criticism dominates—deconstruction, semiotics, post-structuralism, postmodernism. It is a very peculiar climate, summed up by that man of undoubted genius, Monsieur Derrida, when he says that every text is a "pretext." This is one of the most formidably erroneous, destructive, brilliantly trivial wordplays ever launched. Meaning what? That whatever the stature of the poem, it waits for the deconstructive commentator; it is the mere occasion of the exercise. That is to me ridiculous beyond words. Walter Benjamin said a book can wait a thousand years unread until the right reader happens to come along. Books are in no hurry. An act of creation is in no hurry; it reads us, it privileges us infinitely. The notion that it is the occasion for our cleverness fills me with baffled bitterness and anger. The notion that students

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today read second- and thirdhand criticism of criticism, and read less and less real literature, is absolutely the death of the normal naive and logical order of precedence.

INTERVIEWER

Have the humanities failed to humanize? Do you still believe that literary education may ironically foster political cruelty and barbarism?

STEINER

Nazism, communism, Stalinism have convinced me of this central paradox: bookishness—*bookishness*, that old English word, it's a good one—bookishness, highest literacy, every technique of cultural propaganda and training not only can accompany bestiality and oppression and despotism but at certain points foster it. We are trained our whole life long in abstraction, in the fictive, and we develop a certain power—allegedly a power—to identify with the fictive, to teach it, to deepen it (how many children has Lady Macbeth?). Then we go into the street and there's a scream and it has a strange unreality. The image I want to use is this: I've been to a very good movie early in the afternoon. It's a bright sunny day. When I walk out of the movie into the sunshine of the city afternoon, I have very often a feeling of nausea, of a disequilibrium which is nauseating. It takes seconds, minutes, sometimes longer for me to focus again on reality.

INTERVIEWER

Coming out of Plato's cave?

STEINER

But more forceful because of the funny way in which the impact of a movie should be an evening impact. Why is it that the daylight visit to a movie theater is peculiarly and deeply unsettling? Now I expand that experience into this: I spend my whole day with undergraduates in a room, around my seminar table in Geneva. We're trying to get somewhere

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with the problem of the extreme brevity of Cordelia's role in *King Lear*, which is less than ninety lines. Nobody believes this until you count them. Or the great silences in literature, characters who come on and say nothing—from Aeschylus to Dostoyevsky—or say only a few words. Or the idiot at the end of *Boris Godunov*: he sings two notes which go through the whole of the world in their despair and horror. And students have been responding, you've been responding, you know the stuff by heart, it fills you, and you leave, you walk down the street, and you see a headline: "A Million Dead in Rwanda." It isn't only that you are numb to the constant horrors of our century, it's that they don't even enter your imagination.

For me the personal turning point was Pol Pot. Very few knew *at the time* about Auschwitz. Yes, there were bastards who knew, there were sons of bitches who knew and who didn't believe it, but they were a tiny number. Nazi secrecy on this was fantastically efficient. The killing fields were on radio and television while they were going on, and we were told that Pol Pot *was burying alive one hundred thousand men, women and children*. Now I cannot attach honest meaning to the phrase "to bury alive one man, woman or child." One hundred thousand! I almost went out of my mind in those days with bitter impotence. I was obsessed with the hope that Russia and America would say, "We don't know what the rights and wrongs of this incredible geopolitical mess are but forty-five years after the Holocaust or after the gulag, we can't shave in the morning, we can't look at ourselves, knowing a hundred thousand people are being buried alive; the razor doesn't work on the skin. No woman can put on her makeup and think of herself as human. If you don't stop this, we'll come in." I'd hoped Israel would make such a statement, for obvious reasons. Total silence, total silence about any intervention or interference. Pol Pot went on, he buried them alive, he killed a million and a half others, castrating people alive in the fields, and today we're selling arms to him.

Now, Cambodia was for me the turning point to a kind of absolute helplessness, of despair. Rwanda has come since and tomorrow, x, y or z. And this time we know. I do make the—

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and here I use an almost pompous word—ontological distinction, the quintessential distinction between a time when we didn't know and probably could have done nothing about it (whether or not we should have bombed the rail lines remains one of the bitterest Auschwitz arguments; we should have tried; okay) and this time, when we knew the adversary was a minnow, was nothing compared to the power of the rest of the world: Monsieur Pol Pot and his crazed Khmer Rouge. Nothing was done, and we are now rearming him.

INTERVIEWER

What are the implications, then, for your work as a teacher?

STEINER

I've been extremely troubled by this. The implications are that I keep trying to put this to those who learn to read with me. I'd love to be remembered as a good teacher of reading, and I mean remedial reading in a deeply moral sense: the reading should commit us to a vision, should engage our humanity, should make us less capable of passing by. But I don't know that I've succeeded, either for others or for myself.

Is there any kind of education, schooling in poetry, music, art, philosophy that would make a human being unable to shave in the morning—forgive this banal image—because of the mirror throwing back at him something inhuman or subhuman? That's what I keep hammering at in my own thinking, in my own writing. Hence the move in *Real Presences*, coming around that immensely difficult corner, towards theology. What about the great poets, the great artists who have known about such things—Dante, for example, or Shakespeare? Could something make us incapable of certain imperceptions, incapable of certain blindnesses, deafnesses? Is there something that would make the imagination responsible and answerable to the reality principles of being human all around us? That's the question.

INTERVIEWER

How then, fifty years later, do you assess Adorno's famous dictum, "No poetry after Auschwitz"?

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STEINER

It seemed to me at the time an absolutely natural and crucial thing to say; and it hoped for disproof. That disproof came with Paul Celan's poetry, which refuted that statement—and Adorno knew it before he died. Let's take a few steps backward. The obscene question of counting dead heads doesn't arise, but I group the concentration camps, whether they be in Poland, in Germany or all over the damn place, together: the phenomenon of massive incarceration and elimination of millions of human beings from one end of the world to the other. One of the possible responses is to say our whole culture proved absolutely impotent and defenseless, in fact it adorned much of this stuff. Gieseking was playing the complete Debussy piano music on the nights when one could hear the screams of the people in the sealed railway cars at the station in Munich on the way to Dachau, just outside Munich. They could be heard all the way to the concert hall. That is on record. There's not the slightest witness that he didn't play magnificently or that his audience wasn't wholly responsive and profoundly moved.

So there was a nihilistic critique, which was Adorno's, or the formulation of Walter Benjamin: "at the base of every major work of art is a pile of barbarism." You could take that line, as many in the Frankfurt school in a sense did, but take it a step further and say, "Let's shut up for a while." I often had a dream of a moratorium on discussing these things at all—for ten years, fifteen, a hundred years—to try not to reduce them to articulate language, which in a curious way was to make them acceptable. That's what Adorno really meant: Careful! Even the greatest outcry if it is formalized, let's say, into verse or rhyme or stanzas, adds a *mystery of acceptability* to the phenomenon.

The second and most difficult step of all was saying, "No, in despite of all this, I can still convey, communicate something of the essential experience." Out of the whole enormous range of Holocaust literature only three or four writers have pulled this off.

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INTERVIEWER

Who are they?

STEINER

Celan above all. Without any doubt, Primo Levi, the Italian-Jewish writer: supreme, supreme, supreme. There isn't a word out of place; it's a miracle. One or two far less known East Europeans, some wonderful Latvian short stories. Perhaps half a dozen texts where I would say it has justified this incredibly bold attempt. But at what cost? Celan commits suicide. Primo Levi commits suicide. Jean Améry commits suicide. Long after, as if having borne witness, there was no more meaning to their lives and to the language they were using. What horrifies me is any attempt to capitalize on this material by those who did not undergo it.

INTERVIEWER

Were you concerned with speaking about the Holocaust in this way, with speaking about the unspeakable, when you wrote *The Portage*?

STEINER

Yes, I certainly was. I wanted there to draw attention precisely to the terrible ambiguity in all language, in all speech acts. Physics says—and I don't understand what it means but it's lovely—that there is a universe of antimatter exactly mirroring ours and that when matter and antimatter collide they annihilate each other. I tried to show that in Hitler's language there was antimatter, anti-language, that which is transcendentally annihilating of truth and meaning. And that it had to clash with Judaism, which is a faith, a culture, a trust based perhaps excessively on the word, on the articulacy and possibility of meaning and on constant discourse even with God. That's really worth thinking about. Why should He speak? Judaism has always posited a very loquacious God.

So yes, I was profoundly worried about it, and I would certainly not dare to come back to it. After all, I've never been

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in the situation and maybe one shouldn't try. On the other hand, regarding the attacks on William Styron, I was entirely on the other side. Styron is a prodigious novelist, and he has every right to try to do a Nat Turner or a Sophie. No one has the right to say he was never a black slave or in Auschwitz. We can say, "You don't convince me." We can say, "Sorry, it doesn't work." But it is the absolute right of an artist, in my opinion, to try.

In centuries to come, it may be that a new Dostoyevsky or a new Faulkner will find ways of penetrating to the heart of this unspeakable, unthinkable, unbearable reality with insights. What a silly way to put it, but what would Shakespeare have said? I keep thinking that Shakespeare would have had a fifth groom or a seventh servant at the edge of some important scene, possibly of a comic scene, who would somehow have conveyed to us that he had been in a camp. Now you mustn't mock me, but no play in the world makes me sadder than *Twelfth Night*. I've got a real obsession, as with *Così Fan Tutte*: those things which seem outwardly joyous, like "the rain it raineth every day." The songs of Feste, the clown, seem to me among the most magnificent tragic songs: "With hey, ho." I keep imagining somewhere there would have been a servant in the house of the Duke or of Olivia or of Viola, and Shakespeare would in a few moments have made us understand what that servant had gone through. That's conceivable one day in the future. So it's the unknown. It's the great terra incognita of the imagination. The scene is there in everything I write, in all my teaching, in all my thinking, above all in my living in Europe.

INTERVIEWER

Clearly there's a deep connection between your understanding of the Holocaust and your theory of interpretation. Could you talk a bit about that?

STEINER

The key issue here is the sense of what cannot be analyzed or explained. A major act of interpretation gets nearer and

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nearer to the heart of the work, and it never comes too near. The exciting distance of a great interpretation is the failure, the distance, where it is helpless. But its helplessness is dynamic, is itself suggestive, eloquent and articulate. The best acts of reading are acts of incompletion, acts of fragmentary insight, of that which refuses paraphrase, metaphrase; which finally say, "The most interesting in all this I haven't been able to touch on." But which makes that inability not a humiliating defeat or a piece of mysticism but a kind of joyous invitation to reread.

Now, I'm still staying in the aesthetic, but I'll come on to your question about the connection with the Holocaust, and I hope it will be clearer then. There was once a little boy, Paul Klee, and he used to be marched out of Bern, where he was brought up, on school picnics, the most boring of possible Swiss occasions. One day his class was brought in front of a Roman aqueduct, and the teacher was explaining how much water it carried, how it was built. Klee was eleven years old, and he always had his sketch pad with him. He sketched the aqueduct and put shoes on the pillars. All aqueducts have walked since that day; you can't see an aqueduct that isn't walking. Picasso is going down a street. He sees a child's tricycle. A billion people have seen children's tricycles on the streets. Picasso flips it with his hand, making the saddle the face of the bull and the handlebars the two horns. No one else had ever done that, and since then all tricycles charge at you with their horns. No one has ever explained this, nor has anyone explained what Lévi-Strauss calls the supreme mystery of all human knowledge: "the invention of melody." This is one of the sentences most important to me. I delight in the sense of the inadequacy of one's passionate attempts to get nearer. This is the wonder of it. Mountaineers tell you of the postcoital sadness when they're at the top of a previously unclimbed peak, but we never get to the top of the ontology of the aesthetic or the question of the meaning of meaning or the question of the origin of language.

Ours is one of the blackest centuries in terms of death, in terms of torture, massacre. I read with genuine respect the

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economists who tell us that communism or fascism can be analyzed by a good theory of economics or industrialism; or the sociologists who speak of class conflicts, the sociological structure of the city at that time, and so on. The historians all have ideas too. Like all of us I try to keep up with the people who say, "I can explain it to you." It doesn't work for me. There may be exciting partial insights, for example, in the notion that there are in the death camps aspects of a factory. Fine, that's a brilliant insight. I want to think about it. Maybe it's very illuminating. Or when I'm told that Nazism as distinct from Stalinism is based on lower-middle-class instabilities and resentments, I'm very interested. But these explanations, important as they may be, do not help me grapple with the facts.

The facts are that when Hitler's high command said to him, "Führer, we desperately need the trains for fuel, for armaments; just give us four weeks of not shipping people to the death camps," he replied that far more important than winning the war was the destruction of all Jews. The notion that he is mad doesn't work for me at all. He was very unmad. Nor does it help me when I know that Stalin destroys a large part of his educated population systematically while planning the greatness of the Soviet Union.

So I work with explanations of a completely different kind. In the Enlightenment, in the early 1760s, Voltaire, after defending a number of people successfully, issues the statement, "One thing is certain: there will not be the use of torture again in civilized Europe." A few years later, Thomas Jefferson, one of the shrewdest, toughest minds ever, says that he can promise—he actually uses the word *promise*—that there will never be any return to the burning of books. I have an anthology of statements like that. Not by naive fools, but by some of the toughest, most ironic minds. There is a Catholic proto-fascist thinker called de Maistre, who sits at the edge laughing his head off and writes a sheer masterpiece called *The Evenings of St. Petersburg*. He says that as it happens, the twentieth century will be drowned in blood in Europe; that there will

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be camps for the systematic slaughter of human beings. He works with a quite different theory, that of original sin.

de Maistre says, in effect, "Please explain to me the nature of history." If we are rational Homo sapiens on the road upward, what are we doing to each other? Why are our wars getting more murderous? Why are famines getting bigger? If, on the other hand, there were some mode of an original dis-grace—very powerful word when you put in the hyphen; *disgrace* has become such a small word: *dis-grace*, fall from grace, interruption of some kind of relationship to God—then history is a punishment, and we have stumbled into history essentially to suffer and we will continue so till the end, until we either massacre ourselves with a thermonuclear bomb, or our cities implode, as they now may, or there is famine, or finally there is an AIDS which cannot be checked. The whole doctrine of original sin. How do you operate with such a doctrine? I don't know. I call it a working metaphor.

INTERVIEWER

Does it require belief in God?

STEINER

Yes, or—much more dangerous—in hell. Once, very movingly, Pope Pius XII received Paul Claudel to honor the eminent playwright and Catholic poet. "My son," he said, "the trouble with you is you believe utterly in hell; I'm not so sure about heaven"—with a smile. This is a very peculiar form of heresy. It's a form of Manichaeanism. And I call myself a Manichaean, a rather baffled Manichaean. Yes, I'm a coward: I take refuge in life insurance of the highest solid kind, far beyond Lloyd's. Immanuel Kant—the sanest, quietest, most balanced mind—believed in incarnate evil, not just in Aristotle's "evil is the absence of good," which gets you off every hook. Kant didn't mean somebody with horns and tail, but that evil is an incarnate force, a positive agent.

Only that way can I understand why our finest enterprises turn hellish. Think of the original documents of Zionism—

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and my father was in the early group with Herzl: it was a utopian dream, a dream of equality, of full racial understanding, of realizing Jeremiah and Isaiah ("weapons shall be turned into ploughshares"). Look at the suffering. Look at this armed state, which to survive has to be one of the most militaristic societies on earth. We go into Mogadishu to bring food, to help, and it ends in hell, where bodies are dragged through the streets.

What is it that justifies fully Shakespeare finding that "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport"? Or his insight, "The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'"? What has made it come true, over and over and over, that our good intentions, our compassions, our utopias turn infernal? That needs asking.

INTERVIEWER

Is nationalism a prime example for you?

STEINER

Yes. I'm much criticized for this. I detest, I abhor nationalism. I am at home wherever there is a typewriter. I regard flags, passports as dangerous trash. I believe that we are guests of life—there I'm very Heideggerian. We don't know why we're born, we didn't choose to be, we didn't choose to be born in a community, a time, a social class; we didn't choose to be born a deaf-mute among beggars or syphilitics or carrying an AIDS virus or being a millionaire or being incredibly gifted. First of all, we are guests of life and of this earth, which we are systematically pillaging, looting, destroying, polluting, as we know. I believe we must learn to be guests of each other to survive; that it is the peculiar, tragic, Jewish destiny to try to live this very difficult business of feeling at home anywhere. I have been at home in many, many lands.

INTERVIEWER

Yet for all of your travels, you've been very rooted here in Cambridge?

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STEINER

Only part-time. Let's just go back a little. I was wonderfully lucky in my birth. My mother was from a Jewish, Viennese, multilingual bourgeois family. Her great uncle was a very well-known writer, who discovered the manuscript of Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck* in an apothecary shop. My father was from a village eight kilometers from Lidice, the northern Bohemian village where every human being was killed, massacred in revenge for the killing of the Gestapo head. My father comes as a child to Vienna, has a magnificent career in Austria, and decides, in 1924, over my mother's vociferous protest, to leave Vienna, which they loved, because he saw what was coming. He always used to say, "Hitler's Austrian; let's get that straight." So they come to Paris, and I'm born in 1929 into a home filled with books and music and culture from top to bottom: the Jewish Central European tradition. My mama begins a sentence in one language and ends it in several others, almost unaware, so I was completely trilingual from birth. My father begins reading Homer with me before I went to school, begins teaching me the classics under the mounting and terrible shadow of Hitler.

In 1934 a big financial scandal rocks France in which Jews are involved, and anti-Semitic groups are marching near my school, which was very Jewish. So my nurse, my governess—we still had governesses in those days—comes running to take me home. At home Mama lowers the shades on the windows, looking out on the parades of people out there shouting, "Death to the Jews!" Papa comes home and says, "Up with those shades!" and takes me by the hand to look outside. I was fascinated, of course; any child would be. And he says, "You must never be frightened; what you're looking at is called history." I think that sentence may have formed my whole life.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you?

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STEINER

Five. It was a magnificent thing to say to a child. In that sense, I've never been frightened again. I've been very, very lucky and I've been terribly interested in history and in looking out the window and seeing what's going on, whatever it is.

INTERVIEWER

Tell us a bit more then about your early years.

STEINER

Then the war comes and my father is asked by the French prime minister to go with a mission to negotiate with the Germans for the purchase of Grumman fighter planes. A totally amazing story happened. Everybody has forgotten that New York was a *neutral* city in 1940. It was full of Nazi purchasing missions, bank missions, engineers. My father was at lunch in honor of the Trade Purchasing Commission at the Wall Street Club. At his table were representatives of the American treasury, the banks and the French delegation. The waiter brings my father a folded sheet of paper saying that a gentleman at another table has asked that I bring this to you. My father whirls around and sees a Nazi purchasing mission, with the swastikas in their lapels. Perfectly legitimate: they too were buying equipment and arranging oil loans with the Chase Bank and many others. Father recognizes a man who had been one of his closest friends in business, and with whom he has had no contact whatever since 1933 when Hitler took over. So my father ostentatiously tears up the note, the piece of paper, and drops it on the floor. He goes to the john; the man is waiting there, grabs my father and says, "You better listen to me whether you like it or not. I can give you no details, I don't know any. We're coming into France very soon." (This is in 1940.) "Get your family out at any price."

Now, this was one of the heads of the most important electrical concerns in Europe, Siemens. The "final solution" meeting had not yet taken place. But in Poland the massacres were already on, and the heads of Siemens knew something. They

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didn't know the details, because you were shot immediately if you were on leave and talked about it; but it was filtering through the high command, through diplomats, and this man, thank God, believed it, and my father believed him.

My father got in touch with the prime minister and asked him if his family could join him for a while since the negotiations were going to be longer than he had thought. The prime minister said, "Yes, of course, let them join you." That's what saved us. We came out with the last American boats.

This story will be of considerable interest to historians, because it means that *early* in 1940—the Germans came through in May, whereas this was in January—an informed senior German knew something.

INTERVIEWER

Where did your family go then?

STEINER

To New York. My father decided that he should at least make a token gesture towards America and towards our tremendous good fortune. He sent me to the Horace Mann School, where I was an impossible, arrogant, incredibly overtrained, eleven-year-old French schoolboy with fluent English. After two years my father sent me off to the French lycée. One day we played Horace Mann in soccer and they came with all their fancy equipment and uniforms and we had nothing, and we smashed hell out of them. We cheated, we were incredibly rough, but we came home from Riverdale that day in triumph.

INTERVIEWER

I never knew you were a soccer player. How was the lycée otherwise?

STEINER

Of course I was a soccer player, I was French. The lycée was a seminal experience for me. Vichy was running it, and some

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teachers were refugees of genius, all trying to earn a bit of money before they got university posts in America. So I had encounters with the princes of European refugee culture, and that's where I discovered my vocation.

INTERVIEWER

Did you return to France after finishing school?

STEINER

We went back to see our house, to try to pick up the pieces, to see who was alive. Our library had been buried and saved. I had wanted to go on and become a French mandarin. I had no other conception of what life was about. But my papa was much wiser, and he literally hauled me back by the scruff of a furious neck, telling me that I was going to American universities because English was the language of the future. So I was packed off to something called "orientation week" at Yale.

INTERVIEWER

Did they give you a beanie?

STEINER

No, but a French lycée boy of previous years came to my room and told me about the Jewish situation at Yale—how tough it was, how excluded one was. Remember, this is 1948; it has nothing to do with now. So I arrive back at New York, under my own steam. *Time* magazine had a cover story about a man called Robert Maynard Hutchins, in which it said that you could take a B.A. at the University of Chicago at your own speed. I wrote him a "little-boy letter" and got a telegram telling me to come on out.

INTERVIEWER

So you went to Chicago?

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STEINER

Yes. There were fourteen subjects that constituted the normal B.A., and you could take the final exam in any of them upon arrival. If you passed with an A you didn't need to take the course. I took all the exams: passed ten and had four E minuses—which is *below* failing—in physics, chemistry, mathematics and something called (I had never even heard the word before) "social studies." So I had to take those courses, and I had a fantastic time. It was totally new to me. A world opened.

INTERVIEWER

How long were you an undergraduate there?

STEINER

I got my B.A. in one year and then went to see somebody called the "graduate advisor," a position unknown in Europe, about going on in science. This man was a superb mathematician named Kaplansky. After a careful look at my exam papers he said, "You are technically an idiot; you haven't understood anything. Your superb European training means you learned everything by heart, but there isn't a spark of the kind of understanding of mathematical processes that would make it worthwhile letting you into the sciences." I never forgave him, and years later I managed to get a little paper on the history of a mathematical problem into *Nature*, the supreme scientific journal, and sent it to Kaplansky, who was then retired.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get a response?

STEINER

By return of mail. "Thank you for your very interesting paper. I have no regrets for contributing to the history of literature." I loved that answer.

INTERVIEWER

Was it then that you switched to literature?

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STEINER

I studied literature with Allen Tate and philosophy with Richard McKeon. I couldn't decide between them; I loved them both. But then Harvard contacted me about a graduate place, and I committed the snobbish error of saying, "Oh, Harvard!"—fool that I was.

INTERVIEWER

Harvard contacted you? They already knew about you?

STEINER

Someone there told them that I was a student worth having for comparative literature. And my little, snobbish, stupid soul rose to the bait. I was happy in Chicago, passionately involved. I reached Harvard and knew within weeks what a mistake I'd made: the icy academic atmosphere; the fact that if you were not a Harvard undergraduate you barely existed. That was one of the darkest periods of my life. But I had the chutzpah to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship from Illinois, from Chicago. I wrote to Hutchins—this is chutzpah squared, exponential—saying he hadn't had a Rhodes for a long time and that I thought I could win this for him. He was so amused that he gave me one of the two nominations.

INTERVIEWER

How did you win it?

STEINER

In a very strange and haunting way about which I'm still a little embarrassed. They interviewed you until deep into the night at a country club. It was like the foreign service. They called me in, with the other finalist, who had the gold star on his West Point collar and was a double-varsity man, and they said it's going to be "one of you two. You have ten minutes to prepare a brief statement to this committee about your views on the Hiss case." (This was December 1950, between the first trial and the second.) That lovely gentleman

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went in and more or less came to attention and said, "Excuse me, I'd rather not answer this question as a future commissioned officer since it's still under legal review." They called me in, and without any such scruple I developed my long answer: I was passionately convinced that *she* was the guilty party and that he was exercising his paradoxical right of perjury to shield her. I developed this far beyond any knowledge, but they were absolutely intrigued.

Then they said to me, "Now we want to give it to you, but because of your physical handicap, there are no sports. Does any sport interest you?" "Apart from chess," I said, "American football fascinates me." They gave me a piece of chalk—this is all true—and asked if I could show them the difference between a split-T, a T, and a single-wing formation. I said, "That's too easy," and I immediately began, and they said, "All right, you've got the Rhodes." That's a totally true story.

INTERVIEWER

Are you still a fan of professional football?

STEINER

Yes, and college also. I used to go to the Notre Dame games and the Michigan State games out of Chicago. I miss that very much, but I do watch it on TV. I'm fascinated by football's cerebral intricacy and its strange, complex social makeup. In any case, that's how I came back to England.

INTERVIEWER

After studying at Oxford, you worked for *The Economist*. What exactly did you do there?

STEINER

Wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote. I had four wonderful years there. I wrote first about NATO and Western Europe and then about America. For one story I was sent over to cover the Atomic Energy Commission, which included interviewing Oppenheimer at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

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He began by saying he refused to believe that his secretary had made an appointment; then he said we had three minutes, that he had better things to do than to see journalists of no interest; then came a blast about journalism, to which I counterblasted: "Perhaps if you were a little more humane about it, we'd get the story right." And he laughed.

So I went to lunch with George Kennan and Erwin Panofsky and the great Plato scholar Harold Cherniss. Afterwards Cherniss invited me to his beautiful office and, as we started chatting, Oppenheimer came into the room and sat on the table behind us. This is one of the most cruel, brilliant tricks: it makes you master of the situation, and the people who can't see you as you speak to them are completely helpless. Oppenheimer's mastery of these histrionic moves was incredible. Cherniss was showing me how he was editing a passage of Plato with a lacuna, and trying to fill it. When Oppenheimer asked me what I would do with such a passage, I began stumbling, and he said, "Well that's very stupid. A great text should have blanks." There I happily lost my temper: "Of all the pompous clichés," I said. "First of all, that's a quote from Mallarmé, as you, sir, must know. Secondly, it's the kind of paradox you could play with till the cows come home. But when you're asked to do an edition of a Plato text for us ordinary human beings, I am most grateful if the blanks are filled." Oppenheimer fought back superbly. He said, "No, precisely in philosophy you should know more than in poetry. It is the implicit missing that stimulates the argument."

At this point his secretary comes in to say that my taxi is waiting. Oppenheimer walks next to me with that famous walk and asks me if I'm married. I reply, still in a towering state, "Very recently." "Children?" he snaps. "Well no, not yet, we've just got married." "Oh," he says, "quite right; that will make housing easier." That is how I was invited to the Institute for Advanced Study. I was the first very young person in the humanities.

INTERVIEWER

So you left *The Economist* and returned to America?

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STEINER

My editor in London begged me not to leave, pointing out that they were giving me time to write around the corner at the London Library, that the *Economist* job was essentially only three and a half days a week, and that one could work on the side. It was an English man-of-letters tradition. But Oppenheimer told me one can't do good books part-time, which cut through me like a knife. Is it true? I don't know to this day. But his words cut through me at that time: the authority of that man, the charisma, the apodictic contempt in that statement. So I accepted.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you later decide to return to Europe?

STEINER

That's really a central question about everything I am and all my work. Let me first make something clear, which is very often misunderstood or talked about in a silly way. My debt to the United States is enormous. It not only saved our lives in 1940, but it also gave me its education, its American citizenship and the Rhodes Scholarship. My wife is a native New Yorker; my children are all young academics in the United States. For twenty-seven years I've been a critic on *The New Yorker*. I come several times a year to the States to lecture, to teach, to be with family and friends.

Nevertheless, it is entirely true that I want to live and work in Europe. My work turns around a multilingual condition. What interests me most, perhaps, is the question of our relationship to our language, our inward relationship to the languages we speak, and the condition of the polyglot, which—contrary to a lot of silly talk—is not so rare. In Sweden and Finland a large part of the population grows up totally bilingual. In a valley in the north of Italy they speak Italian, German and a local dialect. There are many parts of the world where people are natively multilingual. To me it's central. French, German, English and then Italian, which was later

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added—I live these languages, I write in them, I dream in them. Europe gives me the simple possibility of a multilingual situation. In Geneva particularly, in my life in France, which is a constant part of my existence, I'm in touch with the various levels of myself as I could not be in a monoglot United States.

Second, I am absolutely fascinated by history, by the ancientness of European cities and landscapes. I have never been able, never been intelligent enough, to respond to the vast spaces of the American situation. Put me down anywhere in Europe, and I can tell you within a few kilometers where I am by odor, accent, names, the light on the trees, on the walls of the houses. This magnificent and tragic density of being, this pressure of felt being, is simply an instinct for me; one doesn't reason on it. It seems to be absolutely integral to the way I am.

But these are really reasons of the surface. There is a central and unalterable reason. It's an anecdote; I can't help it. Heidegger said savagely that an anecdote is the enemy of reason. Well it is in a way, but I plead guilty. I am a storyteller, and I love stories. At this time I had two young children and no obvious prospects and had begun very solitary work on *After Babel*. Two American universities were so generous as to offer me their chairs in comparative literature. So I flew over to see my father, who was already quite ill, in New York. We were at the one place that he loved there, the Oak Room of the Plaza: a very old-fashioned, wonderfully European place where he had the same table since 1924 when he made his first visit to America. I asked him what he thought. I listed university A's advantages and university B's; he listened very courteously—he was an austere, difficult man—and he said that only I could decide, of course; then, after a long silence, he said, "How sad that Hitler has won." What he meant by that was that Hitler had sworn Europe would be *Judenrein*, that there'd be no Steiners there. I phoned my wife that night to say I would rather become a schoolteacher, factory worker, anything in Europe than ever again experience the contempt of my father's remark. That I couldn't bear. Nothing was strong enough in me to bear the immense world of sad disdain in

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that remark. I knew he was right. He had given his life to saving us, to trying to save others, and his son was not going to be driven out by any circumstance.

I am a remembrancer. At the center of my work is an attempt to come *after* the Shoah, culturally, philosophically, in a literary sense: to be somewhere around with all the shadows and the ghosts and the ash, which are so enormous here. That is in part irrational; the great chroniclers—Raul Hilberg, Elie Wiesel—have chosen to do this from an American base. I've gone back very often to the actual places. I've gone back often to my father's village in Czechoslovakia. I've seen the camps. I keep going back, almost by instinct, to my school in Paris. Only one other Jewish child survived from my class, also by chance, by pure chance. Europe seems to me the place where I should be to do my work, my teaching and my thinking.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever considered living in Israel?

STEINER

There are mornings when I ask myself in Jerusalem, "Why aren't you here?" That is to me a much more disturbing and urgent question. I've polemicized against Zionism my whole life because I detest nationalism, because I have a kind of racial snobbery. I'm a racist to the tip of my fingers *in an ethical sense*. That is to say, for me the fact that a Jew has to torture another human being, as they have in the Israeli secret police *in order to survive*, is something I can't live with rationally. It seems to me such an enormity. If I'm asked why it is worse than for any other human being, I say that to me it is infinitely worse. We were the people who because of our helplessness because we were hunted, had the fantastic privilege and aristocracy of not torturing anybody else, of not making others homeless.

Years ago, I slipped into the back of a lecture by Edward Said at Columbia. We know each other only by sight, but he had spotted me and without even giving a sign that he had

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recognized me, he brought up Martin Buber's distinguished book, *I and Thou*, and he said, "George Steiner may be interested to know that that book was written in the house from which my parents and I were driven for our lives on a certain night in (I think it was) 1948." And I knew he had won in a terrible way, in an almost transcendental way, the privilege of that mock, of that taunt. We Jews have never been the subject of that taunt because of our impotence in a paradoxical sense. But to me trees have roots, and humans have legs, which is an immense advance. We are each other's guests as we move across the earth. This vision of Judaism runs roughly from Jeremiah to Trotsky, another one of the greatest figures of Jewish internationalism—Trotsky, the prophet, Trotsky the man who believed all frontiers would be abolished, who dies on an ice pick in Mexico after being hunted across twenty countries. There should be a few absurdly impractical Jews left in the great shadow world of Europe who at least remember what the civilization here was. In that sense I simply do not have the privilege, or the ability, or the talent to contribute to American life as I feel I can to that in Europe.

INTERVIEWER

But surely there's something about the character of American intellectual and literary life that deters you.

STEINER

Yes. I wrote an essay much reproduced and hated—among all my writings, perhaps the most hated one—called "The Archives of Eden," in which I stretch my neck out to say that American museums, archives, libraries, research institutes, universities will be the center of the cultural world, living off the art, the philosophy, the metaphysics of Europe. That is to say that the Wittgensteins, the Heideggers, the Sartres of this earth would continue to come from a suicidal, eviscerated, smashed-up Europe; that the secondary work is what fills American culture to a large extent and not the primary; that de Tocqueville was right when he spoke of a deep inherent

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egalitarianism in the hopes of the American mind; and that that kind of social justice and egalitarianism and *decency*—underline that with eight red pencils!—is oddly inimical to certain qualities of absolutely first-rate philosophic and perhaps artistic creation.

To this, Americans will say, rightly, that they're leading the world in ballet—I'm not a judge but I fully defer to that judgment—or that there are now some very good composers: not a Schoenberg, not a Bartók, not a Stravinsky, but somebody as important as Elliot Carter or Aaron Copland. Of course making lists is utterly stupid and gets us nowhere. This is a question of a hunch, of an instinct. Probably I am mistaken, but I'm still not convinced. The European press still will have on the front page coverage of a philosophic event or debate or the death of an eminent thinker. There is a density to the atmosphere, a *vibrato* of ideas.

Let me put it another way. From western Portugal to St. Petersburg, you have cafés, places where you can come in the morning, order a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, spend the day reading the world's newspapers, playing chess and writing. The bibliography of magnificent books written in cafés is enormous. There are people who have always worked that way and preferred to. You don't have them in Moscow, which is an Asian frontier city. The line can be sharply drawn: Odessa is about the limit of the café. I'm a café creature, not a pub creature. The English pub is a very different animal, and the American bar is a profoundly different animal again. I'm at home everywhere in Europe because I go to a café the moment I arrive, either have a chess game, challenge somebody, or have them bring the papers for me on those wooden sticks, the old-fashioned ones where you roll them up, and it's the most egalitarian society in the world because the price of one cup of coffee or glass of wine buys you the day at the table, and you can write, you can do anything. After my lectures in Geneva, my students always knew at which café I would have my second coffee of the morning, or a glass of white wine, and they could come and chat. That's where the intellectual life really blazes.

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These are very difficult issues; there's no use negotiating one's passions or negotiating with one's major errors. My children would say that America is the future and perhaps already the present. They've chosen, and I'm proud of them and delighted to visit them often. But the memories are too powerful, the French schooling was too strong. Why am I not going to heaven? Certainly for very good moral reasons, but for much more practical reasons too: *I've already been there*. What is heaven? It is the Galleria in Milan. I'm sitting with a real cappuccino, in front of me is *La Stampa*, the Frankfurter *Allgemeine*, *Le Monde* and the *Times*. I've got a ticket to La Scala in my pocket, and coming at me are the ten or twelve complex smells in that Galleria—of the chocolate, the bakery, the twenty bookstores (which are among the world's best bookstores); the sound of the steps of people moving towards the opera or the theaters that night; the way Milan vibrates around you. I've been to heaven, so I'm not getting a second one.

Lincoln Center is nothing like this to me. I love and admire the Met but that isn't the point. We are complicated animals and my inner territory, the territoriality of my whole being, is European, and perhaps, perhaps—I know this—that of a lost Europe.

INTERVIEWER

Where is the best writing in the world being done now?

STEINER

Eastern Europe and Latin America, I think, almost without doubt. Great writing, great thinking, flourishes under pressure. Thinking is a lonely, cancerous, autistic, mad business: to be able to concentrate deeply, innerly. Very few people know how to think; real focused thinking is about the most difficult thing there is, and it profits enormously from pressure. Asked about Catholic censorship, Joyce said, "Thank God for it. I'm an olive; squeeze me." Asked why he didn't leave the dangerous Buenos Aires at the time of the Peronistas to take up a position at Harvard, the smiling, blind Borges said, "Cen-

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sorship is the mother of metaphor." It isn't I who say these things, though I've been much attacked for them; it's the lions, it's the people who know about thinking and first-class writing.

For a while still, probably, we're going to get tremendous stuff coming out of recently freed nations. But it's fading very rapidly. Jackie Collins is filling the windows which Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Gogol once filled. The young say, "Cut the crap." They want the latest videocassette. "Your high culture was horrible," they say; "it was rammed down our throats. Nobody asked us whether we liked Goethe; we loathed him." I know that. I'm not totally stupid. In which case I will soon find myself belonging to a kind of mastodon, a partial mandarin survivor of elitist high culture. I know that.

But where is my real difference with most of my American professional colleagues? I can respect and get along with almost anyone *who lives his beliefs*. That's a very dangerous thing. I recently published in France a book of dialogues on Abraham and Antigone with one of the last great survivors of French fascism, a very eminent figure, Pierre Boutang, a philosopher of the extreme right. We differ on everything except mutual respect and the ability to debate our differences, because he has put his life on the line, and I've tried to live my convictions totally. What I cannot bear is democratic populism being voiced, touted and proclaimed by those who owe everything to high culture themselves, who lead sheltered and privileged lives within the groves of academia, and are trying to have it both ways.

In the famous troubles of 1968 and 1969, I was in some of the roughest spots—Harvard, Frankfurt—but the students absolutely respected an unreconstructed Platonist like myself. I had no trouble. They detested, they disagreed, but they knew that I felt passionately. They came to feel only contempt for those who wanted to howl with the wolves. Students can see through hypocrisy as through a glass not darkly. They know who is merely trying to please and flatter them. You cannot have it both ways. A person for whom Plato and Bach and Shakespeare and Wittgenstein are the stuff of his dreams, of

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his love, of his exasperations, of his daily life, of his communication, cannot pretend that he is a populist creature. It is that which nauseates me. If I come up against someone like Camille Paglia, who said Jimi Hendrix is more important than Sophocles, or if I meet someone who is really living that style of life, with all its dangers, then hats off. I may disagree with them. I happen to believe, for instance, that heavy metal and rock are the deconstruction of all human silence and of all hopes for human quietness and inwardness. But if somebody tells me that they're the voice of the future, and they are living that, and not pretending to do it from a white clapboard house with a large lawn and tenure, then there's absolute mutual respect, no difficulty. It's the cant of our profession, the cant, the bloody hypocrisy which gets me: wanting to have it both ways, running with the PC wolves in order to be loved.

INTERVIEWER

Let's agree, then, that there are masterpieces. Let's agree that we can talk intelligently about who the greatest writers are. Who are the best writers alive today?

STEINER

One often gets it wrong in one's own period. Edmund Wilson got it almost right when he espoused Proust and Faulkner, Yeats and Joyce. He had magnificent antennae. I believe that if I'm a footnote to a footnote to a footnote it will be for having fought very early for a writer like Paul Celan. And René Char, whom I believe is a poet who will tower over French poetry as the century ends. This is a very difficult question. One reads ten pages of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* and one has the impression of a Faulkner come again. I try to reread them: impossible. You begin to gag on the formulaic mechanics of the magnificent gift. It is an unbelievable gift. There are pages of prose in his work that may be at the moment the most electric, the most violent, the most inventive prose being written. I think the jury is out. I would like to try again to reread McCarthy.

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I would rather not do Harold Bloomian lists. I hate that exercise. What frightens me are very specific points. In English bookstores the remaindering period for first novels is seventeen days. Now what difficult, original book has a chance? Are books of a more difficult kind going to survive this supermarket of cultural values with its short shelf space, its hype, its slick marketing techniques? Are they going to survive the transformation of the disk, of the CD-ROM, of the new world of actual access to texts? I can imagine that self-help texts, books about sports or current events will survive abundantly. Guides to museums will do better than ever. I'm not sure that a Proust, a Musil, a Broch, a Faulkner has even the ghost of a chance. This worries me. The abolition of the necessary time! Why the hell is it that you and I and everybody else have no more time for anything, despite all the phones and faxes and E-mails? We are short of actual time but more importantly of the inner spaces of the undisturbed which people had before us.

INTERVIEWER

You mention the fax, the telephone, the computer. Let's talk about the implements of writing and the way in which technology does or doesn't factor into your own work.

STEINER

Yes, I'm fascinated by the actual material *techne* of writing. I'm a morning creature. All my best work tends to be done in the morning, especially the early morning, when somehow my mind and sensibility operate much more efficiently. I read and take notes in the afternoon, then sketch the writing I want to do the next morning. The afternoon is the time for charging the battery. I write on very old-fashioned typewriters. *The Paris Review* has the largest collection of insight into this of any publication. It's utterly irrational, but I love foolscap; in America it's called "legal" size. It used to be available in any stationery shop, but you now have to order it in advance. I tend to type single-space on those huge sheets, badly typed without any attention, often even to paragraphing. This is

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the first naively typed, brute output. The second one will be double-spaced, and begin to be on normal-size typing paper, but still with a lot of hand insertions and corrections. So in a funny way, my rough draft is a single-spaced, typed scribble on foolscap. I don't know when it began, but I've been doing this for many, many years and I walk up and down the room like a deprived mother hen when I do not have that odd size of paper which somehow corresponds to the way I see a problem.

INTERVIEWER

How do you revise?

STEINER

On the back of the draft, or in the margin. Then the next, still very rough, draft is double-spaced, so that there I revise between the spaces.

INTERVIEWER

Where are you when you write?

STEINER

It can be anywhere. I've done it in hotel rooms if I have a typewriter along. I have too many offices now: a lovely one in Geneva, this house you're sitting in, my room in Churchill College, Cambridge, and now I'll be taking a typewriter to St. Ann's College, Oxford. I'm very lucky that way: the surrounding doesn't bother me. I also have a huge correspondence. And there I still handwrite a lot. On an average day, I get ten to twelve letters.

INTERVIEWER

How many do you write in a typical day?

STEINER

Four or five, and then many times just a brief apology for *not* responding. I will not do the Edmund Wilson printed

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card saying, "I'm sorry I can't answer." Because I write about too many things, because I mention too many other books and writers, I get endless mail asking me where to find something or what else to read by a particular writer. Those I always answer. This, I think, is for me a kind of moral law.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any particular rituals when you begin to write?

STEINER

Oh indeed I do. That's a very good question; you've made me realize it now. Before I start a new book or a long essay, I will take a page of top prose in the relevant language and read it quietly before I start to write. But it will have nothing to do with the subject.

INTERVIEWER

You read it aloud?

STEINER

Yes, and almost learn it by heart, which—I'm very lucky in this way—I can do very rapidly, even with prose.

INTERVIEWER

Your memory is virtually photographic?

STEINER

It's highly trained. We started as five and six year-olds in the French lycée with ten lines a week of a La Fontaine fable, and we ended with up to one hundred fifty a week when I was seventeen—without difficulty. I still know much of my Racine by heart. So yes, there is a ritual. Of late, for instance, when I was writing *Real Presences* I used to start myself by taking a page of Coleridge. It worked beautifully for me. I have an impression of a music of thought so much beyond my own grasp. In German it may often be a poem, in Italian there are very few days that I don't read some Dante. He accompanies me constantly, constantly.

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INTERVIEWER

As you talk about this ritual you have such sweetness and delight in your eyes. Is the actual act of writing really entirely pleasurable for you?

STEINER

No, no, but I'm lucky. The act of writing usually fills me with joy. There are times when I feel the fright of deadlines, but very rarely. One of the privileges of twenty-seven years on *The New Yorker* has been the range I've been invited to write about.

INTERVIEWER

Do you seek advice from anybody when you're in the middle of a writing project?

STEINER

Never. That's a mistake. The Everyman's Library is for the first time issuing an Old Testament, and I've been asked to do the long preface. It took all summer. Now I'm not a Hebraist or a biblical scholar; the sensible thing would be now to send out ten copies to specialists and ask them what errors I have committed. Maybe this time I am going to do that, but I've never done it before—at my cost. This goes very much against the present collaborative trend. I think a page that sings, that lives in us, is a wildly autistic act; it's mad to do it at all. It's mad to think you might have something new to say, for God's sake, about the Old Testament. How many books are there on it already? Hundreds of thousands? I can't even guess: libraries full. So how can you be so crazy? How can you, after Proust and Joyce and Kafka and Faulkner, sit down and write a novel? I've never quite understood. Answer: you have to. And the *you have to* is a private cancer, a private tumor of the soul. It is not a collective act, as it can be in the sciences.

INTERVIEWER

You once told me that *The Portage* "wrote you," as though you were a secretary taking dictation. Have you ever had that experience before or since?

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STEINER

I've had it on certain pages. The section of *After Babel* on lies as the great creative moment and on the idea that the 20,000 languages are an adaptive way of surviving the monotony of life, each language giving you a different vision of the world—those five or six pages which nobody else had said, and with which nobody agrees. The end of *Antigones* also wrote itself. But the only complete book may be *The Portage*.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned the Everyman Old Testament. Could you tell us something about your other current projects?

STEINER

Yes, I've just completed—what a joy—a book called *Homer in English*, from Caxton to Walcott, four hundred and fifty years of selections from translations of Homer, adaptations, imitations, satires, parodies, pastiches. It is a history of the English language and of sensibility from the early Middle Ages to Christopher Logue's recently published version of books three and four, to Derek Walcott's Caribbean version, to Scottish versions, Irish versions, Welsh and American. It's the most translated text in any language, much more than scripture. There has not been a year since the turn of the seventeenth century without somebody publishing an *Iliad*, an *Odyssey*, a Homeric hymn, or extracts. Since 1945 we have fourteen complete *Iliads* and *Odysseys* out of America and England, and the new Robert Fagles is currently underway as we speak.

INTERVIEWER

Are you writing anything else now?

STEINER

The main project, the one that has me sitting up with the sweat running down, is the Gifford Lectures. I was profoundly moved, surprised and honored to be asked to give this senior set of lectures in philosophy in the western world. Suddenly

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to think that, idiotically, I would be on a list with Henri Bergson and William James and Bertrand Russell and all the most important modern philosophers! There is an understanding that I will write and publish these lectures, which I gave in 1990. So that is the big job ahead. It's a huge task.

INTERVIEWER

These lectures concern, among other things, the nature of the transcendent?

STEINER

Yes, they are called "Grammars of Creation," and they deal with the following question: why, in the English language and all other European languages, can you use the sentence, "God *created* the universe," and not the sentence "God *invented* the universe"? This is a study of the difference between the two words, between *creation* and *invention*. Philosophically, literature, however far I can urge the argument, is leading me to the center of very difficult questions.

INTERVIEWER

This is a continuation in some ways of *Real Presences*?

STEINER

Yes, but in a very different way. Those who accuse me of scattering flatter me. My own vision is one of almost a single point. I was a very young man when I published *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky*, in which I claim over and over that what distinguishes these two writers from a Flaubert or a Balzac, what makes them similar to Melville, is the theological dimension, the question of the existence of God. The book spells out what *Real Presences* spells out thirty-five years later. I am convinced that there are certain dimensions in literature, the arts, music, but also philosophy, which cannot be attained if the question of the existence or nonexistence of God is ruled to be nonsense.

The consequent atheist is a very rare being, and inspires me with awe and respect of the deepest kind. Ninety-eight

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percent of us live in a middle wash of approximate inherited superstitions, imaginings, fears and hopes, where if the phone rings at night, and we hear our child has been in a traffic accident, we start screaming for God in one way or another. It's a humiliating condition. The real atheist and the true deep believer—a man for whom there is an order in the universe, for whom even the death of his child, unbearable as it is, makes sense in a certain dimension—those are the proud few. We spoke of my deepening conviction that there is absolute evil. I wish I could be as convinced about absolute good.

But I feel certain that we will no longer in the West be able to produce certain orders of literature and art and music and thought if the consensus of the culture is what logical positivism and linguistic philosophy in Oxbridge would say: that a sentence containing the word *God* is necessarily a nonsense sentence. If that view prevails, I think very small beer will follow.

INTERVIEWER

How is this related to the huge break in western consciousness that you see occurring in the last decade of the nineteenth century?

STEINER

That's where it starts. Mallarmé and Rimbaud prepare for Derrida, Lacan and Foucault by saying that there is no subject, that there is no "I," that a word is the absence of that to which it refers (the wonderful Mallarmé line: "the word *rose* is the *absence* of any flower"). We are confronted here with the full consequences of another saying of a logical positivist: that the word *lion* does not defecate or have four legs.

INTERVIEWER

In *Real Presences* you use a good deal of Catholic theology. How do you, as a Jew, explain this?

STEINER

Christianity, differently from Judaism, has an aesthetic, has long concerned itself with the place of the arts both in life

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and in man's relation to transcendent emotions. Judaism does not. Like Islam, Judaism is profoundly iconoclastic and Judaism nobly and immensely seeks not to have images of any kind. Christianity, which in my opinion is a form of polytheism because of its trinitarian beliefs—a very high and noble polytheism, but not monotheism—is charged with an awareness of the symbolic, the allegoric and the imaginary. I don't think one can write or think very long about the role of transcendent motifs, subjects, symbols in art, literature, music without confronting a great body of Christian thought from St. Augustine and St. Thomas to the present.

INTERVIEWER

Love is also an important Christian theological concept. In the Penguin edition of your selected works you claim, "The root of all my subsequent work and teaching was the early conviction that serious literary and philosophic criticism comes from a debt of love." Could you please explain that?

STEINER

With pleasure. I have suffered my whole life from the awareness of living in the age not, as often said, of anxiety, but of scorn, of envy and of jealousy. I have published over a hundred and fifty pieces in *The New Yorker* and, let's say, over two hundred and fifty in places like the *Times Literary Supplement*. In thirty-five years I think there have been four or five really negative reviews, if that. I have turned down many books which I didn't want to review because they're so lousy. I have tried to praise, I have tried to delight, I have tried to say to people, "Read this book."

I'm totally out of sync with the British note of tight-lipped delight in dismissal, in condescension, in carping, and with the general *invidia* (the great Latin moral-theological term) of modernity. We are in the culture of envy. When I have students who are much abler than I, who are quicker, deeper, more creative—and I've had perhaps four or five, some of whom are very prominent now in America—it is an utter privi-

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lege for me. That's when it all makes sense, that's when I know I've been of use.

What is our function, people like you and I? We are the pilot fish, those strange, tiny creatures, which go in front of the real thing, the great shark or the great whale, warning, saying to people, "It's coming." When I was in Africa, in a game reserve, we actually saw the beautiful little yellow birds that sit on the rhinoceros and chirp like mad to alert everyone that a rhino is coming. Now a good teacher, a good critic says, "This is the real thing. Here's why. Please read it, read it, come on and buy it. Go and get it."

I shall never forget my joy one day while teaching at Cambridge. A student was late for a tutorial, so I had a few minutes, and in the mail was a vast packet, a manuscript. *The New Yorker* usage is that I don't read manuscripts or endorse them in order to preserve full liberty as a reviewer, and I deeply respect that. So I was trying to get this huge package into the wastebasket and it wouldn't fit: the cardboard was too damn big. I read the first sentence of this manuscript and, Good God, I thought, something tremendous has landed on my desk. I phoned Mr. Shawn to ask whether I could review it, and he was very amused and he said that it would probably be a year and a half, two years before the book would be out but that yes, he would reserve it for me: *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

INTERVIEWER

Had it been accepted by a publisher at that point?

STEINER

I'm not sure. But I wrote the author and said, "You know, this is it." I did not tell him but I told my wife and wrote in my notes that I was afraid there would never be another book from this man worth reading. That was totally clear to me, which is a terrible thing, and I'm right, very sadly. But what I'm trying to emphasize here is my joy at being the chirp bird on the rhinoceros.

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So I have been so lucky in being able quite often to say, "My God, this is wonderful." I'm still fighting. I believe England has had only one major novelist after Hardy: John Cowper Powys. Only a handful of people agree with me; I may be getting this completely wrong. I was able to get some of it into paperback, there is a following, but so far there's been no breakthrough. I believe *Glastonbury Romance*, *Porius* and *Wolf Solent* are the big ones. I write about him, I lecture, I tell people to go out and try it. So far, very few respond, and many have honestly tried and say I'm totally wrong, that he's unreadable. Fine. I would rather make those mistakes than keep my passions quiet.

Another case for which I've never been forgiven is Lawrence Durrell. Now let's be careful. Durrell is now mocked everywhere. I still believe that the first three volumes of the *Alexandria Quartet* are like nothing else. I admit the fourth one goes to a shambles, which is tragic, and that there is endless stuff after that. That doesn't matter. Suppose I was wrong, suppose I am wrong: hurrah! What interests me are errors of passion, errors which you stick your neck out on. Oh God, the attempt to be right! The attempt of our academic contemporaries to play it safe! For forty years I have been asking my students whose works they collect, which living writers they love so much that they want even their weaker books. If they don't collect any writer, I know they will not get anywhere in my trade, in my craft. Luckily, for Simenon I have Gide and everybody else on my side, so there's no courage in my saying he may be the most important of modern authors. But if somebody says Zane Grey is it, and lives that passion, and collects and studies, then I say, "Hurrah!" That is a soul that is safe for salvation. But the person who asks who the winners are, who the stock-market winners are, where they should invest: no, no, no! So yes, love is capital for me. It's been a bitter time, one of the bitterest times of cultural envy, and there have been very big men responsible for it. Every time Leavis opened his mouth, it was to say there were five classics, that the rest was damnable and vulgar and mustn't be read and wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. There have

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been hate critics in our time. There have been very powerful and influential teachers of hatred. These I have nothing in common with.

INTERVIEWER

In *Real Presences* you refer to the transactions between the artist and the audience on the model of hospitality. The reader, you say, provides a welcome, the listener takes the melody into his or her inner house of being.

STEINER

That's exactly what we've been talking about: *cortesia*, tact of heart, a welcome. So many examples immediately swarm to mind of people who show off with negativity and who are totally sterile themselves. A great critic is a disappointed writer. A great critic knows that he is a eunuch's shadow compared to the creator. Do you think one would write books on Dostoyevsky if one could write a page of *The Possessed*? Now that's where I have tweaked the nose of too many of my contemporaries in the universities, and that they don't forgive me.

INTERVIEWER

Music seems to play an increasingly important part in both your life and your work. Why?

STEINER

The first answer comes from insights into aging, which say that music becomes more and more important for those who have spent a life in language: that gradually one reads less and listens more. Though I just learned this recently, apparently it is a known psychological phenomenon. If this really is true, if it's not a myth—psychology and psychologists are full of myths—I can only echo it fervently.

But there's much more involved in my attraction to music. If you crowd me up against a wall, if you kick me hard enough, I can just barely imagine how some of the major poets work. I know I couldn't write a single line like that, but at least I

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can imagine that a person like myself might. It's no use when I come to Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, above all Schubert, who is for me at the center with all the major works of his last year. I don't get it, okay? *I do not get it.* Lévi-Strauss says that the invention of melody is "the supreme mystery," but it's not just melody I don't get. I don't get Bach being able to do the forty-eight preludes out of a four-note motif. I don't know how a Wagner holds in himself the arching construct from the opening chord of the *Ring* to the last. Or a Beethoven quartet.

So first of all I find myself in front of a terra incognita from the point of view of creative process. Secondly, I don't know what music does to me. I know it does *everything* to me. In my books I've often spoken of the opening of Edith Piaf's "*Non, je ne regrette rien.*" I go cold, I go hot, I'd vote for Monsieur Le Pen, I'd join the Foreign Legion. All sorts of magnificently irrational things follow on those opening bars for me. We know what music does to temperament. Plato suspected it of being too dangerously powerful. We know its uses in medicine, in therapy. What does music do inside us? What is it that responds?

Thirdly, I am always accused—rightly, rightly—of being utterly out of cultural touch, some say out of a prehistory. But I have always, with joy and I hope genuine understanding, kept up with the most difficult modern music. There are composers living right now—Nono, Berio, Ligeti, Kurtág, Elliot Carter, Brian Ferneyhough, Zimmerman—whom I'll go listen to whenever there is new work, and thrill to. Contemporary music is tremendous for me. I have no difficulty with it. But I do have difficulty with rock. Not jazz: jazz seems so close to classical music. I was at the University of Chicago in the years when Dizzy Gillespie was beginning at the Beehive and when Charlie Parker was becoming a legend. So I had a good start. But I think rock is on the other side of humanity.

INTERVIEWER

And what's that?

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STEINER

It is meant to deafen; it is totally sadistic; it is meant to humiliate. I associate it with the end of our sense of the harmony of life. If statistics are right, in the year 2100 there will be more people alive on the planet than the totality of the dead up to that point, than the estimate of all those who have died since Neanderthal. That's an awesome statistic if it's right. Death is closely related to what I call real music: a certain sense of the end of time and of personal life. Rock is something quite different. Maybe it is the music of the infinity of the living young. They certainly seem to feel that. It connects with drugs, with ecstasy, but above all with the hatred of silence; whereas in the best classical music and in jazz, silence plays a very major role.

So music seems to me the most exciting unknown central human activity. There have been half a dozen people who have had anything to say about the meaning of music: St. Augustine, Boethius, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Adorno. It's so difficult. The next Copernicus may have something to tell us about what music does inside us and how it is created. Above all, music illustrates for me that order of meaning that you can't translate, can't paraphrase, can't put in any other terms, and yet which is intensely meaningful. If I am doing any thinking, as I am in the new Gifford Lectures, about the meaning of meaning, music is that which says to me, "Think harder."

INTERVIEWER

If your fundamental model of meaning is translation, is music that which cannot be translated?

STEINER

Yes, nor paraphrased nor metaphrased. What is meaning? Why do we know that music means? What do we mean by its meaning?

INTERVIEWER

And the answer has some connection with the transcendent?

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STEINER

For me. I am so certain that the area of what we do not know is infinitely greater than that of what we do know, that our little landscape is so small compared to the sum of being. When somebody asks how one can have an intense meaning which one doesn't understand, music is the one place to turn for an answer. That's why I always use a very important Schumann anecdote, which is central to my teaching. He had played a very difficult étude and one of his students asked if he could explain it. "Yes," said Schumann, and he played it again. That to me is central and that's why I learn so much by heart and go over the same text over and over with my students: play it again. Music is my validation, my tuning fork for my whole feeling of the *mysterium tremendum* in the arts.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever played music?

STEINER

No. Middle-fi, low-fi, and high-fi, as Bob Hope said. A good answer.

INTERVIEWER

Let me turn to a different question altogether. Who were your most important teachers?

STEINER

I'm glad to answer that. Some were schoolteachers. When I was in French kindergarten we wore blue smocks and held our lunch baskets and stood at attention when the teacher came in. So the teacher comes in—I know his name to this day—looks at these five and six year olds, and says, "Gentlemen, it's you or I." I knew then what the whole theory of teaching is about: "It's you or I." Whenever I hear about these teaching colleges in America, I laugh sardonically because the art of teaching is simply to know what that sentence means.

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Now unquestionably at Chicago I came across beings who *lived* thought. Richard McKeon was one of them. I did not understand a lot of what the scientists were telling me but I knew—something very hard to express—a carnal joy in what they were doing, in the unfolding tomorrows of their discipline. Allen Tate was a great, reserved, difficult teacher whose ironies left one helpless and yet eager to come back for more.

Then I met a number of men not in formal teaching but as teachers for my life. The most privileged relations I had were with Gershom Scholem. I spent time with him in Switzerland.

INTERVIEWER

When was this?

STEINER

1972 to 1976. There I knew the rarest of combinations: minute textual, philological scholarship, based on the idea that God is in the details—which I admire helplessly, not being able to do it well myself—with the huge scope. I am surrounded by these rancorous dwarfs who think that to be a specialist is in itself the way to God. The devil it is! What was said by Housman? "True scholarship is much rarer than poetic genius." Scholem made me understand what that sentence means. The dwarfs that surround us do bad scholarship on smaller and smaller problems, which has nothing to do with the virtues of specialization.

Then there was Jacob Bronowski, whom I met with only a few times, but each meeting was a major event. His love of romantic poetry, his radical politics, his science, his theory of culture: he was the kind of man for whom the "two cultures" argument did not have any meaning. He was creative in both. Then, unknown to the American public, a man who died recently, professor of philosophic theology here, is a Scottish man named Donald McKinnon, whom I revere. McKinnon was a magnificent Aristotelian and Kantian scholar, who lived the daily newspaper down to its last line. I'll tell you about him, and why I believe this is how you should teach.

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He found a small item in *Le Monde*; he checked it to be true, and it was. The French paratroop commander in Algeria, a General Massu, had himself stripped and tied up and his genitalia wired and had three hours of full torture by his own men. When this was over he said, "Complaints by victims were exaggerated," that it was intensely unpleasant but bearable. Donald McKinnon read this news item and came in gowned, as one was in those days, into his packed lecture hall to teach his course on Kant and ethics. He told his students that in view of this news item he could not go on teaching Kant and ethics, that they were going to spend the next lectures examining the implications of absolute evil in this news story, in a man like that. He developed it to every reach of theology and philosophy, saying just what this story meant in terms of morality. This was his way. He and I got to know each other intimately. I was honored by being asked recently to give the address in Cambridge for his memorial.

But I've had other masters. Mr. Whittaker, of the original *New Yorker*, whose nickname was Mr. Frimbo, was my editor for the first twenty years there. Mr. Whittaker regarded an imprecision, of syntax or punctuation, as being dirty in an almost moral sense. If a sentence wasn't absolutely precise, if it waffled, if you put a colon where there should have been a semicolon, you were doing dirt: on your reader, on the language and ultimately on yourself. This could lead to transatlantic calls which you simply wouldn't believe. He would say, "Mr. Steiner"—always Mr., of course—"I think what you really meant was . . ." And you'd say, "Well that's what it says," and he'd say, "No, no, not quite. Will you listen to it again?" And he'd read it again, and gradually you would realize that he was right, that it wasn't exactly what it said. Now that kind of love for the resources of the English language, for the inexhaustible nuance of English punctuation, is extraordinary. Mr. Whittaker was a superb teacher, and so was Mr. Shawn, whose care over detail became a legend in his lifetime. Those were true teachers to work with in harness.

Yes, I've been lucky. Let me paraphrase one of the many Hasidic parables and say that I hope I would have the courage

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and energy to go a long way barefoot to a man or woman who could teach me something. I'm endlessly grateful.

INTERVIEWER

Whom do you consider the strongest influences on your work, on your vision, on your writing?

STEINER

The Frankfurt school. Walter Benjamin would have written the really great *After Babel* if he had been alive. I'm haunted by the knowledge that this book should have been his, and how much better it would have been. Then there is Adorno, whose seventeen volumes of writing on music will survive long after the critical theory of the Frankfurt school disappears; Ernst Bloch, the messianic Marxist utopian; Lukács, the senior Marxist literary critic. The central-European Jewish tradition—messianic, polyglot, with Goethe and Pushkin and Shakespeare and music at the center—has been an enormous influence on me: Jewish survivors, Jewish involved people, Jewish makers of great historical mistakes, Jewish Marxists, Jewish messianics, Jewish prophets, Jews who lived their century.

Nothing is sillier, dryer, more emasculated, more castrated than current American academic writing on the Frankfurt school by people who have never heard a mob in a street, who have never smelled a prison, who have never known what a concentration camp is, who don't know one single thing about the fact that these men *lived* their abstractions in bone and blood and gut and tripe, that they *lived* their century as our slick mandarins don't. These American discussions about the nuances of meaning in the sociology of the middle Adorno are hair-raising. They would have filled Adorno with sarcasm and wonder and a sense of defeat.

To be in Lukács's room was to be in a storm center of our century. He was under house arrest when I was with him in Budapest. I was very young and unbelievably sentimental, and when I had to leave I had tears in my eyes: he was under house arrest and I was going back to the safety and comfort

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of Princeton or whatever. I must have made some remark, and the contempt in his face was overwhelming. He said, "You've understood nothing of everything we've talked about. In that chair, twenty minutes from now, will be Kadar," the dictator who had put him under house arrest. "He's my student. We're working through Hegel's *Phenomenology* sentence by sentence. You don't understand." And indeed I didn't, I hadn't understood. That story alone reeducated me about the bizarre byzantine world of Marxist intellectuality and cruelty and seriousness in which all this stuff operated.

R.P. Blackmur was another major influence: his essay-writing style, his obliqueness, his ear, his formidable sense for the way ideas get themselves into what he called "executive form," into performative motion; his Dante essay, his Henry Adams, his James. Then there's somebody whom nobody reads in America. Oh, they read their Derrida, their Foucault, and they're flat on their stomachs in adoration, and I ask them if they have read Kenneth Burke and they say, "Who?" Burke was a considerable influence on me: *A Grammar of Motives*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, the study of Logos in Milton and religious writing. Do you know that I can't get a reprint edition of his work on the rhetoric of Hitler's early speeches? It was Burke who did the first analysis, asking what this linguistic construct was, what this man was. There's a tremendous Burke essay, almost unobtainable, on the violence and fascism of language in *Coriolanus* in which he is already working out deconstruction and semiotics and postmodernism. And too late people helped me to C.S. Peirce, whom I regard as the greatest American philosopher. He opens up the whole of modern language, philosophy, semiotics, semantics.

I.A. Richards was also very important for me. But as a book, Empson's *Structure of Complex Words*, for which I would give you the whole of Derrida, with all due respect, is probably one of the supreme acts of reading, of close reading. His internalization of almost the whole history of English poetry and of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, of the life of a word, is monumental. So I suppose my influences have been a very varied group. But sorry, I add on all the time. My discovery

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of Heidegger, for example, came for me fairly late, when I was beginning to work on *Antigones*, which is only twenty years ago, and since then he has never left me. I would like, before I shut up completely, to get nearer the question of why Plato, Heidegger, Sartre flirted so profoundly with the inhuman. I have hunches on that. But they are very provisional.

INTERVIEWER

Abstract thought is somehow attracted, perhaps perversely, to the mob in the street?

STEINER

Only to say that there is in the absolutely pure intellectual living at that height of abstraction a hunger for action, for getting out there into the muck. It is possibly subconscious but almost desperate. A.J. Ayer claimed that he was only happy watching football; for Wittgenstein it was westerns: every time an afternoon was open, he was off to see still another western or another detective movie. Just to rest, I think, just to take a break. And taking a break can become nazism; or in Sartre's case all the Stalinist lies; in Plato it was the tyrant Dionysus whose prime minister he hoped to be three times over. It's an expensive way of taking a breather, but I think maybe they have to.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from the material that you quote in *The Death of Tragedy* you have not published any translations of your own, which seems a bit surprising for somebody who knows so many languages and who has been so deeply interested in the meaning of translation. Is there any sense in which you're translating every time you write English?

STEINER

You're right: I do leave the actual translating to others. And yes: there *is* a sense in which I translate myself into English. I

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do continually translate myself inwardly. I've used the word *magma*, volcanic mixture, to describe this phenomenon: the far back down there, the root polyglot. Very often as I search for the right word in one language, those of the other languages interpose as being more exact, or being more of what I would really like to say if I could. Many who have objected have felt in my English prose a certain resonance that is not native, that is not instinctive. That's quite correct. French and German are in me continually and I will now be teaching for the first time in Italian, with joy, *con amore*. I often know that the first filaments before the lamp lights, when the heat pours in, are multilingual, are a mixture, and that the English sentence is a compromise with a richer intentionality which is multilingual.

Roughly since the 1890s we've been getting major polyglot literature. I consider Oscar Wilde, who wrote *Salome* in French, one of the most indicative figures in all modern literature. The Irish extraterritoriality to English is crucial. We do not know in what language or languages or magma Beckett composed. He would never discuss the matter. Borges is a polyglot. He says over and over that he is closer to English than to Spanish. Above all there is Nabokov: French, Russian, English and American English, which is different again. The novels of the *English* English, like *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, are very different from, say, *Lolita*. So he switches four times, if not more. The greatest single book in English poetry, many people say, is the 1667 Milton, which includes Hebrew, Greek, Italian, Latin and English.

We forget. The monoglot condition is a *Romantic* obsession. Herder and Hamann believed that you are rooted in the blood and bone of one language. This is both true and not true. Judaism never was, because if it went beyond Hebrew, it was leaving its native home and it became the great wanderer across languages. But these are issues for the real masters. For the little people like me being polyglot is a limitation of sorts. It's quite clear that there are degrees of somnambular at-homeness (the fashionable word in Cambridge now is

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inwardness) which I will never attain. On the other hand, to me being polyglot is a boundless wealth; it's the open window through which I look on so many landscapes. It's for outsiders to judge whether it has damaged or enhanced my work. Now, I'm a member of the German Academy of Literature, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in England, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; I open the Salzburg festival, in German of course, and my audience regards me as native to them. Around my seminar table at the University of Geneva for twenty years, there were often fifteen or twenty languages spoken as a matter of course, because of all the Slavonic and Middle Eastern presences among my students. I gave the address on October twenty-first last year for the two hundredth anniversary of the École Normale in Paris, and it would not occur to them that I'm not French. They think I'm merely doing this odd detour in the barbaric Anglo-Saxon lands like a missionary and then I'll come home to Paris. I'll be privileged to teach this year in Italian in Sienna.

I owe everything to the good luck of this very complex condition. Contrary to *Reader's Digest* psychologists and sociologists, who would have us believe that to bring up children in several languages initiates schizophrenia, I happen to know in blood and bone that this is an absolute lie, that in fact it initiates a tremendous wealth of human experience—and possibly survival when you've got to run. So those who are making America more and more monoglot will pay a very high price. I know Anglo-American covers the globe, that it has become a kind of Esperanto. But that may not be an eternal condition; that can fade again. And what about provinciality of the soul? What a wonder of different life it is to change languages, to know that in England *bread* is bread, that for black Americans it means wealth, and that for French *pain* means bread, *pain* is something you lack and you make revolutions for. Or to know that there can be no translation, perhaps thank God, of the German *Heimat*, no translation on Earth; and that men died for *Heimat*, whatever that means. Or to know that every sexual encounter in a different language is a different eros, that there is a Don Juanism of language

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possibly far wilder and more exciting than the Don Juanism merely of the flesh.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to say any more about the relationship between eros and language?

STEINER

Yes, we're learning more and more. In the parasympathetic nervous system, which is where the unconscious and the conscious mix, stomach pains start being conscious, ulcers are possibly treatable by meditation and self-hypnosis. It's beginning to look as if this may be that crucial area where what we call "thought" and what we call "body" mesh. Sexuality seems to be on that osmotic fault line: erections, orgasms are part conscious, part unconscious, immensely subject to verbal stimulation in most human beings. Each language draws taboo lines in quite different places. Things which in one language are the bedroom's final wild privilege are in another language almost public, and vice versa. The pacing of the words one uses is completely different in different languages. Even breath control is different in different languages, and it's very important in sexual intercourse and in foreplay. This is an absolutely unexplored field, and if we learn more about it we will learn a great deal about the interaction of the biosomatic: bio and soma, semantics and the somatic, the semiotic and the seed, the way they interact. Gay and lesbian speech, for example, must impinge profoundly on the nature of the sexual act. We have everything to learn. The next Copernicus will be the man who will say, "Drop the five-thousand-year-old body-mind vocabulary, that primitive dualism." I am absolutely certain the next Einstein will be the man who rethinks for us what is now an archaic and quite useless vocabulary.

INTERVIEWER

What about the dualism of men's writing as opposed to women's writing?

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STEINER

In the best women writers it isn't on. Anonymously you can't tell the "femininity" of a page in George Eliot, in George Sand; possibly flickering at the edge of the Brontës; certainly not in Jane Austen, who was just *better* than any other man writing. Not different, but better: more precise, incisive, humorous, witty, ironic, condensed. Today it's different. Today this has become a cause, a vengeance, a hope which is highly conscious. I'm sure there are important differences. This is extremely unfortunate, because there is only good writing and there is only bad writing.

INTERVIEWER

This is a particularly important moment for you as you assume the Weidenfeld Chair. Is there particular significance in the fact that this is the first chair at Oxford in comparative literature?

STEINER

Very much so. Oxford has not wanted to create European studies, feeling quite justifiably that much of what is called interdisciplinary is not respectable, that an enormous amount of hot air has been emitted by such programs in intercultural this and intercultural that. But they were very conscious that they couldn't go on as before, especially in light of the identity crisis of England in regard to both the continent and itself. Is England European or is it not? The Channel Tunnel is symbolically one of the most difficult moments for the average Englishman to countenance. So Oxford decided to set up a chair in intellectual history in honor of Isaiah Berlin and this chair in European comparative literature, which I'm told was set up in the hope that I would come to start it.

The history of comparative literature is a tragic history of Jewish refugees. Its origins are in the Dreyfus Affair, which is not often realized. I'll be talking about this in my inaugural lecture, in which I'll also argue that comparative literature is not so much a discipline as a way of feeling, since everyone

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compares when they read. So this is for Oxford quite a moment, though not a comfortable moment in every respect. English is the world language. English people feel that English literature is the richest of all, needing very little from outside. If you have Shakespeare, they feel, do you need much else? If you have Newton and Shakespeare, Parliament and English law, which has covered the globe, what are all these other things? My task is not easy and it will need perhaps those diplomatic skills which have not been my strong point. That's why I look forward to it so much.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your works, if you had to predict right now, do you think will endure?

STEINER

The realistic answer is none, but of course one isn't honest when one says that. Nobody should try to make their own balance sheet. In *Bluebeard's Castle*, where I set out the paradoxes of barbarism and culture, and a number of the essays in *Language and Silence* seem to have had a very large impact. My main act of scholarship and doctrine is *After Babel* and to my joy it's now reappearing revised, updated and expanded. *The Death of Tragedy* is used all the time, it's widely quoted and seems to have had quite a run. I have been lucky. Out of fifteen books, eleven are in print, which is almost unheard of today, and most are in paperback. You were directly associated with the publication in a single complete issue of *The Kenyon Review* of *The Portage*. If the two long monologues—that of Lieber, the Jewish man who is hunting for Hitler, and that of Hitler himself—were to disappear altogether, I would be very sad. I think they say certain things that I've not said elsewhere and in a way that is not said elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from reading and writing and music, what are your other passions?

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STEINER

I read and read and read. Yes, I am a book creature, but I do have a number of other passions. I am perhaps the worst chess player possible but a passionate one, and I wrote a book about the Spassky-Fischer match. I follow chess very closely, play whenever I can and collect chess sets. I am now in a state of depression about the computer that beat the world champion, that beat Kasparov. I've replayed that game four times and there was no mistake on Kasparov's part. It's a deep and beautiful game and that unspeakable machine saw deeper than the most powerful mind. All joking aside, that one I would have liked not to live to see.

I'm also wild about mountains, hence my joy living for twenty years in Switzerland and my keeping a base there now: to walk among the hills, just to walk, to look. Another difference perhaps from the democratic instincts of the United States is that I'm not a marine creature, a lover of the democracy of beaches. Mountains are harsh selectors. The higher you pant your way, the fewer you will meet. Solitude is, surely, the test. Is one worth living with (oneself)? In a way I am unable to formulate, even the final depths of love, of intercourse, find one alone. As will death. Consumer societies and egalitarian utopias have tried to efface this fact. To me, it has always seemed obvious. Death will, I sense, be interesting. It is not, I suspect, an interest to be shared.

—**Ronald A. Sharp**

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Debora Greger

The Trompe L'Oeil of History

after Tiepolo
je ne dis pas Venise par hasard
—Proust

The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra

Because the painter knew that history,
when it happened, happened in Venice,
it's on the steps of the Riva

that Cleopatra meets Antony's ship,
and not so long ago, merely the Renaissance,
so high it smells like the Grand Canal

that lies hidden in the fresco
behind her froth-white, useless horse,
his unseaworthy, shell-like ship—

you make an appointment to step into history,
into its ghostly ballroom
where you stand, feeling underdressed,

and study the painted ceiling, the peeling walls,
waiting to have seen something . . .
a rustle of silk in a forest of spears?

The guard who led us up the once grand staircase,
who's seen how the story of love or power ends—
it doesn't matter which—

leans on one of the doors, one that's real.
Time is still about to triumph over Beauty overhead
merely by lasting, the only victory

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left the city sunk to its knees,
still begging Napoleon,
begging the rising water, indifferently.

A Frenchman has brought out binoculars
to catch the way the Winds were given flesh
that faded even as it dried.

Still, they blow the first cloud into place,
a cloud about to cast the lovers into shadow.
She's pale, a beached blond in shell-pink silk.

Darkened by the days at sea,
though all you see of the rest of his life
is the pregnant billow of a single sail,

he still won't meet her gaze,
not yet. It's still early,
already too late. Have they not met?

An African slave has turned his back
on this ancient history, turning to capture
or let go a monkey over the trompe l'oeil balcony.

The Feast of Cleopatra

The past is in the next room,
the painter would have us believe,
and the food's better—

a dog still waits at the feet of its mistress
like love for table scraps.
But Cleopatra has called only for a glass

of vinegar, she's so extravagant.
Holding a pearl earring,
she reaches for the goblet,

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ready to prove to Antony,
girded in armor for this battle across the table,
whatever it was she proved.

But not quite yet.
Pliny still wants to know of the pearl,
do we get the most bodily pleasure

from the luxuries that cost a life?
Where before they only dove for pearls,
now even the poor desire them, he says,

a jewel attending a lady like a slave.
Look how the pearl has warmed to the skin.
This he calls natural history

for want of a better word. But not yet.
Not yet does love begin at the beginning,
acidly, its slow dissolve.

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Two Poems by Jeffrey Harrison

Alexander Kinglake and the Giraffe of Paris

When Alexander Kinglake was seventeen,
the pasha of Egypt sent a young giraffe
as a gift to Charles X, King of France,
and in doing so created a sensation.
Not since the Medicis had brought one to Florence
had anyone in Europe seen a giraffe.
The story of how the animal was sent
across the Mediterranean on a ship,
wearing a strip of parchment around her neck
inscribed with passages from the Koran;
of how she walked from Marseilles to Paris
and was greeted in every town along the way
by celebrating crowds, much like the ones
that not so long before had cheered Napoleon;
of how her retinue marched into Paris
preceded by a regiment of soldiers;
and how the king received her like a queen
from an exotic realm—we can only guess
at how this story roused the young Kinglake.

But eight years later, now a law student,
he set out in the opposite direction
on a journey whose farthest reach would be
the country the giraffe had started from.
He wanted to be "free, and unlabeled,"
even while he knew that "Civilization
was watching to throw her lasso" and yank him
"up from travel, as a colt from grass,"
to lock him in society's stale prison—

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as the French had placed the innocent giraffe
behind bars, then drained her mystery
by making her a symbol of high fashion
and mass-producing trinkets in her image.
Kinglake must have thought of the giraffe
as some part of himself that longed to find
a way back to its source: a desert lake
known to Bedouins as the Sea of Milk.

Two Salutations

for James Merrill

1

In 1834, when Alexander Kinglake
stood by the banks of the Sava River,
at the frontier of the Ottoman Empire,
and bid farewell to his friends, he turned
and saw the border officer stride toward him
with his hand outstretched, asking once more
if he was ready to leave the civilized world.

He knew this man had been exposed to the plague,
that he lived in "a state of perpetual
excommunication" under the yellow flag
that hung above the quarantine station.
In that moment Kinglake paused to consider
how he was about to cross the boundary
between Christendom and the Orient,
between the righteous and ungodly, cleanliness
and disease, even between the living
and the dead. He saw great vultures wheeling
over the city on the other side:
this was Belgrade, but might as well have been

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the port of entry to the underworld.
He saw the oarsmen waiting in the boat
and thought of the ferry across the River Styx
and of Charon, who was now approaching him
in the guise of the Austrian border officer.

He had prepared himself for his departure
"with nearly as much solemnity" as someone
"departing this life," but now he felt
the sudden joy of being free at last
of "the stale civilization of Europe,"
of the "state of utter respectability"
which had imprisoned him in England.
He thrilled at the thought of being robbed
or murdered by fierce-eyed men in turbans.
He did not recoil from the border officer's
outstretched hand, but met it with his own
and gripped it firmly, ready to embrace
"the Splendour and Havoc of The East."

2

Despite its dandified bravado, that handshake
marked a firm resolve, some might even say
an obsession. For his entire journey
Kinglake took no precautions against the plague,
as if the absolute freedom he craved
included the possibility of death.
He spurned the other Europeans he saw
weaving through the streets of Constantinople
trying not to be touched, "slinking from death,"
and in contempt for them and all that they stood for
he touched the lolling foot of a plague-stricken corpse
that passed by in a funeral procession.

The presence of the plague was a stimulant
he came to need, bracing his nerves
with an "unusual animation"

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and lending him the proper "reverence and awe"
to regard the remnants of dead empires.
In Cairo, where the plague was in full force,
he woke each morning to the howls of mourners
who trailed the biers that passed incessantly
below his window, and he savored the air
"thick with the fragrance of burial spice."

Like the Moslems, Kinglake put his faith
in Destiny, and walked serenely through the streets.
He came to believe that those who lived in fear,
constantly checking for symptoms of the plague—
the parched mouth, throbbing brain, and rapid pulse,
the lump like a bullet lodged under the arm—
these people brought the symptoms on themselves
and soon became the food of squalling jackals:
like the money changer who hoarded his days like coins
and snatched the bills from Kinglake's hand with tongs
but not long afterward died of the plague.

How different was the noble old Osmanli
who was his host in the village of Sakkara,
which the plague had left alone. Even so,
this man at first did not touch his guest
out of deference to European fears.
But as soon as it was clear that he, not Kinglake,
would be the person endangered by contact,
he gently laid his hand on Kinglake's arm
and welcomed him as one who had been blessed.

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John Peck

From the Headland at Cumae

Faded and baked here to a tawny grit,
spills of blood and seed from humanity
called from it for its crimes against mute earth
gully in footpaths, dribble down to the sea,
payment now and forever drawn from birth
through flesh's sunny darkness. Light yeasts in it.

And if I find the slight slope to the temple
of that light's god dragging at me through heat,
shallow degrees of slant up to remnant stone,
something more than burnt air, or the repeat
of weight known as time, pulls heavily in this zone,
something the bone brings, terrible though simple.

Phoibos, slayer at distances with shock,
sower of plague and arrower of healing,
tension of bright-dark beyond spanning, love
will not quite cast out evil while revealing
your fissionables. The raven was your dove.
Heavy isotopes hum with crickets in rock.

Neither woman nor man, my driver laughed
when his lights torched writhings down the far shoulder,
cross-dresser in the night beyond Naples, huge,
sinuous, crooning as we shot past. Life seems older
in its variant forms, drawn by the centrifuge
to the rim and swinging, swayed in time's dream uncalfed.

For the vast thrower, shafter of quivering force,
sex was filigree in whoever served.
Pythoness, yes, wombed keeper of those coils

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in the wet cellar where tongue darted and swerved.
But her own throat when it swelled with voice knew toils
past a man's strength, torqued bulging from the source.

And that young man fitted with bone and thong
and membrane from his withers by his father
the maze moulder, when he climbed into flame
itself in the high nucleus, dripped as slather
down the sky's maw. Union there, with an aim
at the center, crisped on a central soundless gong,

sizzling from his overreach extended
back on itself and down, the soundless hurry
of the sea far below minutely riven,
trembling in place, diamonds in blue slurry
nowhere disturbed yet flecking everywhere, driven—
all this a boy's cry endlessly thin, suspended.

The sybil when at last her throat disgorged
its burdens rumbled like a pawing bull,
or the bull-fiend on Krete, and shrilly warbled.
Birds ride the bull's hump in stone graphs, that full
barbarity at poise piercing now the garbled
clang of Ikaros, over us tensile and forged.

This in the crumpling whistle of shells and frags
in their close arc. Philosophy gets precise
when it turns practical. This in our background whirr.
Archimedes, old Fermi in your eyes,
naked, ecstatic with theorems that assure
conclusion, your city falls, your hacked flesh sags.

There was a sprig which, if you bore it in hand
on landing here, your pilot drowned and your herald
crushed in the surf, would bend and seem to listen—
there was a branch that trailed her voice through imperiled
corridors to throats of the dead, and glistened,
then brought you back to your breath near shining sand.

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And there was pelt from the solar scavenger,
its blond mane tossing with your workings, turning
catastrophe to triumph, lion crud
strewn now on waves, coat of the charger burning
obsidian cobalt platinum and mud
in craters of the shaker and avenger.

Eroded skull of this squat promontory,
nubbled shrine over cave by surf hypnotized
before deeps enameled with fire's mosaic,
you are the structure lucid though pulverized
behind the logics, and the omens prosaic
in their spelling out, and the blaze of story.

Give me your light! I am the darkened thing
seeking it. Give me your fire and your cry!
But hold me from sulfurs she inhaled when she twisted
over the fissures, give me your hand from the sky
we have fallen into. Give, yes, what you insisted
she utter, rasped uncoilings of your spring!

And then release me to the animal
shy of speech yet steady in ecstasies,
your cousin the outsider's gaze through life,
the drink of it down, and finally mind as frieze
eternally in metamorphic strife
released, sea stone and cloud infinitely small.

And there the migrant and his wanderers
may find the new land, and their future wars
may roll, exhausted in hissing foam, to sink
over the fish spines, and the blunderers
of fulfillment stare at samsaric wink
of ocean, stare and find sleep that dissolves the curse.

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Carol Muske

Having Fled the Cité Universitaire

(Paris, 1970)

I rented an atelier attached to the flat
of a fading French film star, Marie-Claire—
who sighed, shaking out her trademark titian hair,
then rolled a joint, lit up the dollar/franc debate.

I was made to feel, for the first time in my life,
like an American. It was a past I'd planned to lose
and *fast*; yet the Yank accent, blond hair to my butt,
tie-dyed Levis, were what landed me (by luck?) in *Hair*,

on a strobe-lit, hyper-choreographed self-dare.
An "Auditions" sign on Boul' St. Denis had drawn me.
Summoned down center, at Théâtre Porte St. Martin, shocked
at my sudden, weird élan, I belted "Easy to Be Hard."

(The callback, a blue pneu, came with producer's card.)
The French cast was cruel: the only time I stripped for
the nude scene, they "disappeared" my jeans, my "pull-ovair."
Curtain-wrapped, I hissed: *filthy Frogs! Ici la guerre!*

Still, the troupe's lovely star praised me, took me
post-show, to eat escargot at Les Halles. At dawn,
delivery trucks honked, then backed up, burying her car
under bushels of parsley: avalanche of sullen green snow.

Inside, as wipers parted the grassy sea, she kissed me.
Confused, I wrote poems in the wings till the house-
lights flickered. At the first chords of "Aquarius,"
I crouched, then tom-tom'd onstage—every inch

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our director's Rousseau-red notion of a girl-brave.
Back at Marie-Claire's, a terrible artist (now dead)
had stacked his bad paintings near my bed: they bled
into my dreams. When the old concierge cackled and

called me Petite Malheureuse, she meant I was too
inept to trip the *minuterie* on each landing
before the bulb below blinked out: I climbed blind.
Late afternoons, I sipped hash tea with Marie-Claire,

then set off for the theater *seule*, thinking how odd
it was I'd come all the way across the sea to under-
study the role of a bimbo in love with a Hell's Angel.
Yet I knew just enough about poetry to take notes from

the chorus: knowing one night I'd step into that lit spot
transfigured, star-hot. Baring only my soul, shaking out
my trademark hair, I'd speak my lines in a new voice,
like Marie-Claire: before all of Paris, I would sing.

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Two Poems by Edwin Gallaher

Marvell's World

He never knew the famished clutches
you dismissed, embraces only you found
unembraceable. A corset's white knuckles
couldn't grip you and Andrew tight enough.
Licit chaperones of all things chaste,
after the affair you both gleaned what
then couldn't be imagined for yourselves.

He was lured to politics, regime; you went
with Ernest Liebstät's raffish troupe
of Passion players where, your hair cut short
as the only girl, you portrayed an apocryphal
Magdalene, offering in spoiled contralto
self-scrutiny from the hay-wain stage:
Did I love Him? Not that way. He wanted

earth-shine, partial almanacs of timely
pleasures. I wanted eternity's age.
That was all you said, or could: soon
dawn with its rake thrashed black fruit
from night's prickly orchard. Unlike Eve,
no one bled when you graced the worm
of Marvell's time, our world, with yes or no.

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Negative Handprints at Gargas

c. 15,000–10,000 B.C.
Hautes-Pyrénées, France

The sound of great machines breaking down
was our master: *to make things out of air*
drove the spark-lit engines of our work.
Oh, make things from the air—churning water,

electricity. Currents entail failure—
waves drowning on the shore—and all work
is a small wish for failure, a part
of one's self not hearing the breakdown,

breathless pistons in collapse, iron parts
stamped like red-coal eyes to earth again.
Fire, too, was a master. Work is flame—
in the belly, in the groins of earth

opened like fists emptied of prayer.
Life's best lived underground. Unreachable
by sandblasts, seas, tributes to the dark,
by splayed hands which extend to warn, to teach.

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John Reibetanz

A Chest of Angels

> *I have always felt that desolation,*
> *that hell itself, is most powerfully expressed*
> *in an uninhabited natural landscape*
> *at its bleakest.*
>
> — Anthony Hecht

1

To each his own hell. Mine was an uninhabited
landscape as far from nature as you can get
without actually leaving the planet, a man-made

moon waste on Sixth Avenue in Brooklyn,
fired in the sun's kiln through unending
afternoons when I was nine or ten.

I can never get the whole scene put together
in my head, thanks to whatever guardian
spirit flags down potentially dangerous

intruders on the verge of memory,
but parts of me hold parts of it: my ears
play out the hissing wires' repeated rise

and fall, dry waves breaking above pavement;
my nostrils chafe where fumes of gasoline
weep from soft tarred patches in the asphalt;

through a chainlink grid, my eyes take in
some lot's trapped beach, its black sand an amalgam
of gravel, soot, and broken glass; or they blink

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in sequence with the traffic light's perpetual
solitaire at a carless intersection,
flicking over greens, ambers, reds;

my hands remember enough not to touch
the shut steel trapdoors of delivery chutes
where air trembles over surfaces

as at their beginnings in a furnace.
What fills my mind to bursting is emptiness,
the spirit of inverted Genesis

transforming light and water's urge towards fullness
into miracle of unearthly loss.

2

Sentries, a pair of gasoline pumps napped.
Their rubber arms dangled groundwards and looped
back up, hanging slack from the brass lapel

their trigger fingers hooked at shoulder height.
They were no angels, but kept the gate of hell
whenever I made visits to the angels.

Behind them, next to a roll-up garage door
always rolled up, with an invisible car
always risen above the stone lintel

on the hydraulic lift, a soft-drink cooler
sat coffinlike against the stucco wall.
And always songs from a hidden radio

promised cool mountain rivers to the hot
flat city: somebody else must have listened,
but I never saw a soul in all my visits.

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The angels' wings fluttered the moment I raised
the lid, a potent shimmer, as if the sun
itself shone from the chest, not its reflections

playing off the steel bars and icy waters.
The angels sat in rows between the bars,
their orders chevroned by the shapes and colors

of their glass capes: the bluish, scalloped whorl
of cherubim, the powers' straight sheer crystal,
the emerald flare of flaming seraphim—

all emissaries from the sky-washed shore
of heaven. To put a coin in the dispenser,
slide one of them along its plated channel

and lift it free through the chest's narrow gate—
to kiss the cold stars of its distillation—
was not important; it was only important

to see the angels swimming in the glitter
and dip my fingers in their flickering water
at the center of that man-made desert,

knowing that they were man-made, and might shatter.

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Two Poems by Patricia Corbus

In Circe's Courtyard

Some of the sailors
change easily. Brought
into my presence
already toads, they
hop away. Before
I can touch my wand,
the others trot off,
squealing. Obdurate,
a few, standing back
among the ruins,
glare so hard at me,
daring me to raise
my filthy stick, that
they transform themselves
to stone, becoming
marvels of this isle—
and my own masters.

Words to a Dying Star

You are not Aldebaran, glaring and bloodshot
eye of the bull, head lowered, about to gore me.
You are not Antares, the falsely young, speaking
scarlet and jovial, close to the milky breast.
Unlike them, you endure no companion, faint
to others, but unspeakably dear and absorbing.
No power is hidden or taken from you. So I ask:

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Arcturus, make me as proud as you
to be old, bloated gold-vermilion as you are,
and grumpy. You do not wear your age with shame,
but glory. Stream that stern red-gold on me,
righteous Polonius-prophet, Job's familiar,
for whom the words "Lo" and "Behold" were pulled
like tonsils from God's infant mouth. Your dotage
is heavy with time, slow dalliance, dominion;
your venerable eye sees clear as a day-old mouse.
What is a thousand years to you?—how far
you have come with us—how far to go!
I too am a youngling. *Make me fresh gold.*

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William Olsen

Kresges, 1963

The Cubans are vaccinating anything
live they can find and burning the rest.
My childhood pours gasoline over the toppled cows and pigs,

the hooves that hooved through mud and the noses that nosed
through swill
crinkle to ashen tinfoil,
and flesh unfolds to eulogy:

breathe in and gag.
If everything solid burns away, then it does.
Communism's under meteorological siege this year,

waves heaping patch-sailed tuna boats on sea walls;
Hurricane Flora keeps renewing herself,
old Havana royal palms

down in the streets, oars lashed to delusion.
The tar-paper shacks have been strip-searched and laid bare
by childhood.
Rats and backed-up sewage flood the promenades,

and here in Park Forest—pre-fab, Arcadian, outermost burb
of Chicago—
inside and outside the rain that seems eternal,
earfuls come over a hundred Kresge radios

while my mother is thumbing through packages of Burpee
seeds,
that happy gallery of heavenly bodies.
Money is free as oil to spill from hand to hand,

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earthly sales to be rung up and sacked,
the registers' spooled numbers to run their crazy rotations
till the score between buyer and seller evens

and while a Venezuelan boy-god named Luis Aparicio
wraps himself
in a rained-out prayer in a Comiskey Park dugout
that the league-leading Yankees will choke and die this summer

and while a magic bullet waits to perform
its balletic pirouettes
into the official version

that the truth doesn't exist except in slow motion,
that a president's final benediction
begins all malediction,

my mother who is the squall line of her mother
is dragging her microburst son in tow behind her,
freely glad to be momently clasped together

in our separate needful kingdoms—
and the Sale goes on.
More and more and more and more rain hovers

like a helicopter
and the upright pinwheels in front of the hardware store
rejoice by trembling,

acting alone and alone and alone to all appearances,
loose with the truth of the drizzle,
little liars about wind's magnitude:

they make it so easy to look so cheerful yet so
driven by everything splintered and flooded and swept low.

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A shark's tooth nerve-storm crackles over a hundred Kresge
radios,

the posters of Ho Chi Minh
have ripped from Havana barbershop windows and then the
windows explode
and human hair blows harrowed everywhere.

I drift from the glass-case reflection forecasting my face—
armadas of Case knives safely harbor
like the seven ships nearing the Bay of Pigs

to bring on a shower of bullets
and save the people—
to a little island in Empire that turtles cobblestone,

clumped together under a plastic palm.
Every pilgrim purchaser is a giant.
The shine of her diamond ring like Fat City,

my mother's hand looks unfamiliar
as it lowers to the green glower—as if it belonged there—
of an artificial paradise

and plucks one struggling turtle up from a Styx of hamburg
and shit pellets.
It doesn't seem to want to leave its turtle fate.
Which is why I think salvation a Chinese take-out box

properly folded and sealed with the skill of civility.
But I could hear a lost soul in there, too,
climbing the walls

of blank space. Eternity is so young.
The young, the old, the middle-aged, they sit at the counter
and eat.
Steam unravels from the coffee cup

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before the quick-eyed cashier can ring it up.
Communism is spreading
but the Third World War is being won in Kresges,

and she and I with my doomed and myopic turtle
are in it, winning it, buying it,
every tall aisle a dry little street for lingering along it

while news of a hurricane and a game rained out forever
breaks from the clearance wall's once new line of radio alarm
clocks.
Eventually music thunders on again,

its hundred glowing radium faces
glare upon us all.
Time is singing, so she buys a clock for a song

plus three packages of Burpee seeds:
the onion, a moon impossibly float
above the garden it comes from; green beans, aerial canoes;

The beet, red-bearded and banded, alien as Mars.
The seeds rattle when I shake the pictures,
deracinated scratchy celestial voices.

O past without gravity,
O turtle island, every
creature is paid for and every creature is free,

my mother's hand in my hand guides everything.
Then homewards carlights blow through
the blown and blurring trees,

and one pair is ours and all the rest are blind.

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Karen L. Newcombe

A New Eve

The central divide of the body is invisible,
only hinted in the dip of the back
along the spine, or the primal hair
rising from pubis to umbilicus,
unsuspected like the five-point star
inside the halved apple, what's left
of five dried basal petals.
Left and right console each other.
One side falls to sleep, pulling the other
with it between worlds. They go
together and return orderly, without
swallowing one seed, without
turning for affirmation to the other face.
It is their tradition. Also by tradition
they share a mouth and tongue, though both
may try to speak at once, they agree
at all meals, entranced by the fumes
drawn up each separate nostril.
Secretly, each side longs to escape
this intersection, to attempt
symmetry on its own, to form a new race
in its own likeness, perfect,
coiling economically up the tree
to take an apple in its one, sensual hand.

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Russian Portraits

The portraits that follow are from a large number of photographs recently recovered from sealed archives in Moscow, some—rumor has it—from a cache in the bottom of an elevator shaft. Five of those that follow, Akhmatova, Chekhov (with dog), Nabokov, Pasternak (with book), and Tolstoy (on horseback) are from a volume entitled *The Russian Century*, published early last year by Random House. Seven photographs from that research, which were not incorporated in *The Russian Century*, are published here for the first time: Bulgakov, Bunin, Eisenstein (in a group with Pasternak and Mayakovski), Gorki, Mayakovski, Nabokov (with mother and sister), Tolstoy (with Chekhov), and Yesenin. The photographs of Andreyev, Babel, and Kharms were supplied by the writers who did the texts on them. The photograph of Dostoyevsky is from the Bettmann archives. Writers who were thought to have an especial affinity with particular Russian authors were asked to provide the accompanying texts. We are immensely in their debt for their cooperation.

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Boris Pasternak

Pasternak's poems are like the flash of a strobe light—for an instant they reveal a corner of the universe not visible to the naked eye. I fell in love with these poems as a child. They were magical, fragments of the natural world captured in words that I did not always understand. Pasternak was my father's favorite poet. In the evenings he often recited his poems aloud, as did Marina Tsvetayeva, a friend of the family who often came to our house in those years before the war.

Long afterwards, George Plimpton and Harold Humes brought the live Pasternak into my life. A year or so after the resounding success of *Doctor Zhivago*, when the dust had begun to settle on the scandal of his being forced to give up the Nobel Prize, they sent me on a mission to Moscow to interview the poet for *The Paris Review*.

I'll never forget that sunny day at Peredelkino in the winter of 1959–1960, a few months before Pasternak died. The sparkling snow, the fir trees, the half torn note pinned to the door on the veranda at the side of the house: "I am working now. I cannot receive anybody. Please go away." On an impulse, thinking of the small gifts I was bringing the poet from admirers in the West, I did knock. The door opened.

Pasternak stood there, wearing an astrakhan hat. When I introduced myself he welcomed me cordially as my father's daughter—they had met in Berlin in the twenties. Pasternak's intonations were those of his poems. In an instant the warm, slightly nasal singsong voice assured me that my parents' country still existed and that it had a future as real as that sunny day. Today, no matter how harsh life in Russia is, that flash of feeling is proven true. Russia has survived, and the natural world around us which Pasternak celebrated is as wondrous as ever.

—**Olga Carlisle**

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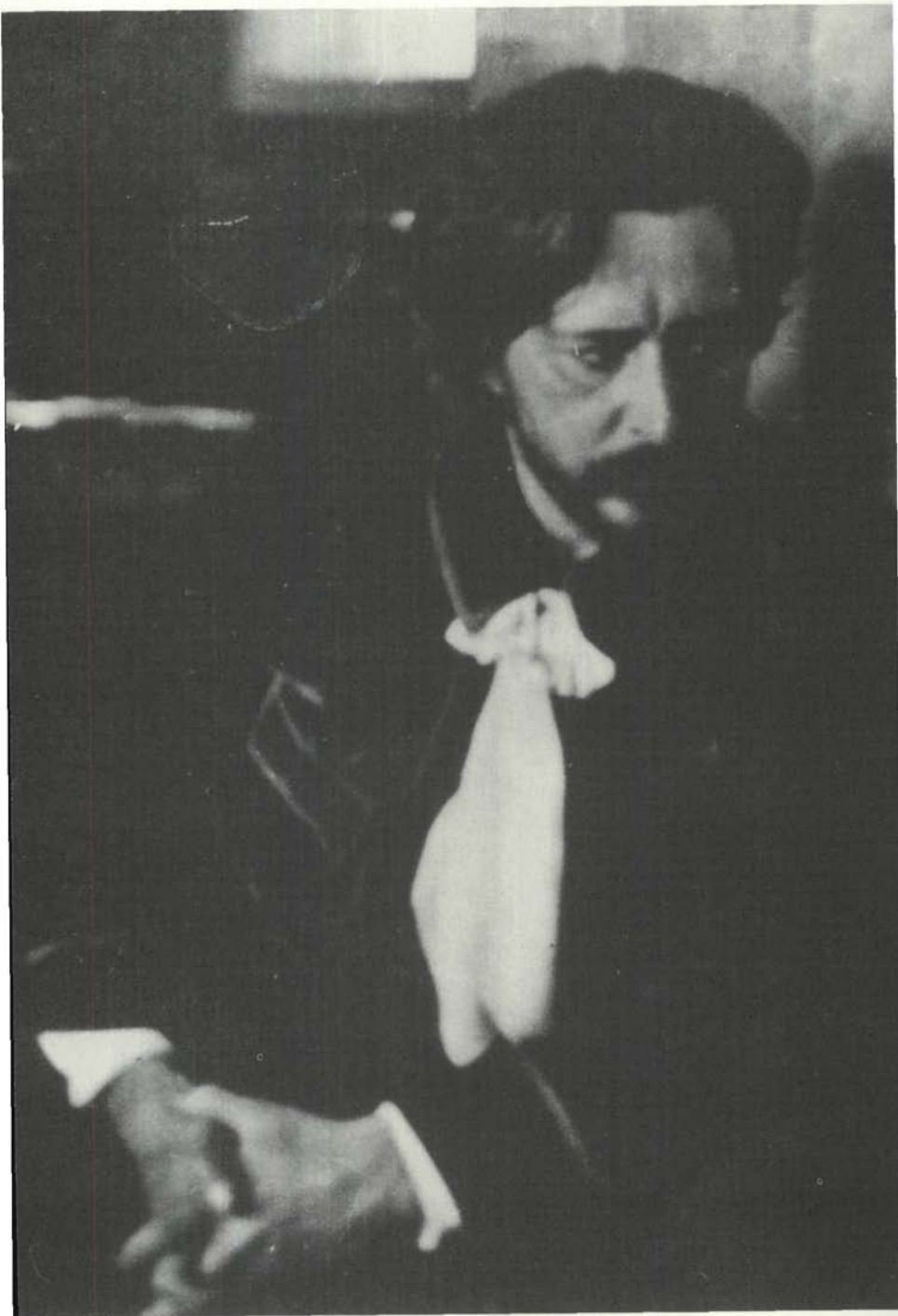

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Leonid Andreyev

When I interviewed Milan Kundera in the eighties in Paris, he said: "Andreyev, an old friend, a friend of my childhood. A huge writer." And Pasternak in 1960 in Peredelkino: "The 1900s in Russia loom in the mind like great mountains seen in the distance, enormous. Andreyev's talent was enormous and it seems to grow with time."

Yet at that time Leonid Andreyev was all but suppressed in the Soviet Union. On my visits there, if I identified myself as his granddaughter I was greeted with awe—a proscribed writer who had loved his country with the dangerous, passionate intensity that he brought to political writing, to literature, to the theater, to photography, to life.

Long before my visits to Moscow, during the Great War, when Leonid Andreyev was still one of Russia's most famous writers, he had foreseen Lenin's demonic plans for the future. He denounced the oncoming Bolshevik takeover, calling for an Allied intervention. Then, in 1919 Andreyev died in Finland in complete isolation and disappeared from Soviet literary consciousness for fifty years.

Now in the nineties he is being rediscovered in Russia, his stories published, his plays produced—two are hits in Moscow this season. *Ekaterina* was a sensation in London last year, the story of a young woman betrayed by the men in her life, much as Russia was betrayed by her leaders in World War I. *The Governor*, a novella about the assassination of a Tsarist high official by righteous revolutionaries, echoes the present-day life in Moscow, where political power and fear of terrorist reprisals are inseparable.

In this self-portrait, Leonid Andreyev, the grandson of a serf, with his extraordinary looks, his multiple talents, seems once again to be brooding about the future of man and seeing an abyss.

—**Olga Carlisle**

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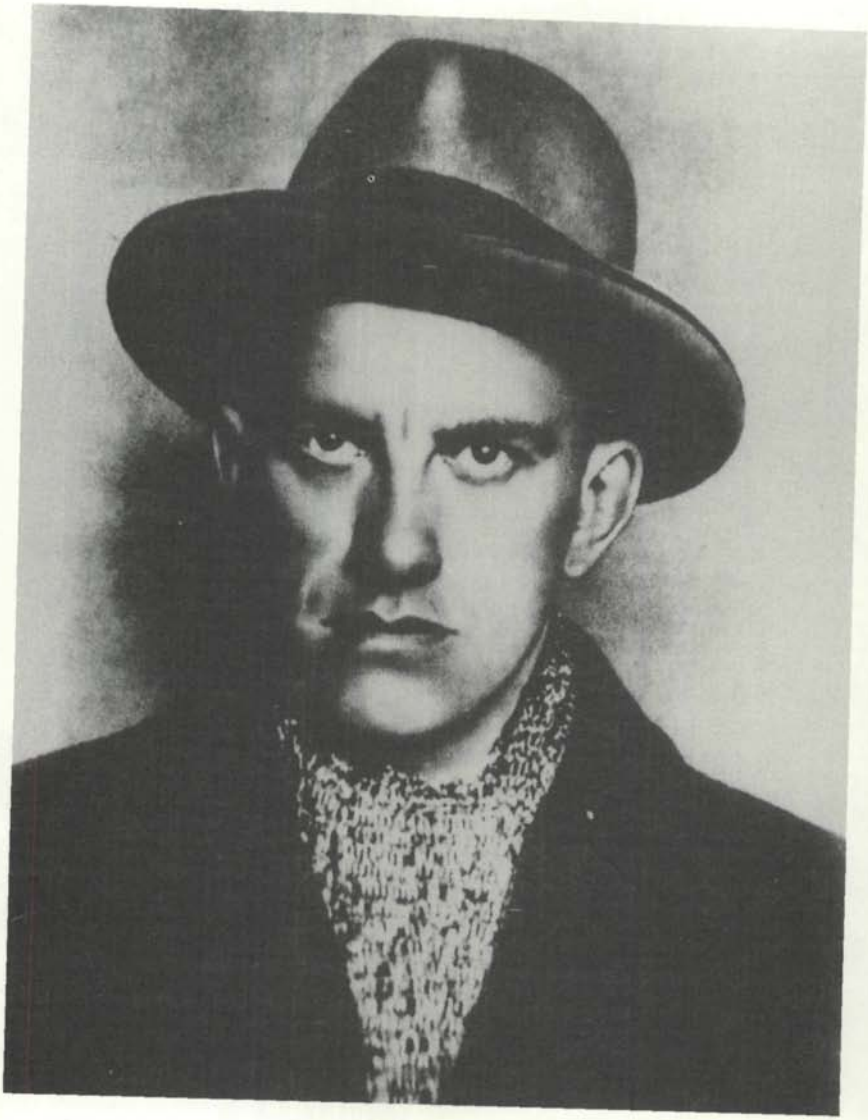

Vladimir Mayakovski

"I am *not* Mayakovski's daughter!" I shouted to the three gents from the Union of Soviet Writers seated in the berth opposite mine. It was 2 A.M. on a June night in 1979, on a nicotine-reeking train bound for Tbilisi, Georgia. I was part

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of a delegation of American writers sent to the Soviet Union for one of their literary palavers, and my Soviet colleagues had come into my compartment in the middle of the night to convince me that I was Mayakovski's daughter. Now this allegation was not entirely without substance. My mother, Tatiana Iacovleva, who had fled to Paris from the Soviet Union in 1926, was one of the two great loves of Mayakovski's life; he had committed suicide a few months after she married my French father, and some of his finest late poems had been dedicated to her. Moreover, in the early 1970s the prominent Soviet magazine *Ogoñok* had published a story, accompanied by an ancient photograph of me as a bikini clad fourteen-year old, declaring that Mayakovski's daughter was alive and well in the United States.

Even then I had reeled at the possibility of a paternity other than the one I knew. My father was a valiant diplomat and one of the first martyrs of the Free French movement. What did I have to do with the flamboyant Soviet propagandist Mayakovski, an uncouth egotist and somewhat overestimated poet who drove a long silver Bugati during his trips to Paris in the 1920s? Besides, the chronological facts made this paternity more than improbable: Mayakovski's very last stay in Paris had ended in April of 1929, and I was born on September 30, 1930.

"These are the facts!" I proclaimed to my Soviet colleagues in the pre-dawn of Georgia, brandishing my passport and pointing to my birth date. "What are you thinking of, an elephantine gestation?"

"Someone made a mistake on your passport," one of my Soviet colleagues maintained. "*Irunda*, nonsense!" I argued back. "In the U.S.A. we don't fake passports!"

By three or four A.M. the *tovarishchi* had slouched back to their own compartment, looking defeated. Trying to catch a wink, I thought of a few men—beyond my own heroic, undeniable father—whose daughter I wouldn't have minded being: André Malraux; Jean Gabin; the great poet René Char, another valiant Resistance fighter. But Mayakovski? A thousand times *nyet*. I felt only pity for the passionate manner in which this gifted, exploited poet had extolled the Soviet dream, and for the bitter disillusionment that was the true cause of his death.

—Francine du Plessix Gray

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Vladimir Nabokov

One of the fallacies about becoming a writer is that, in order to do so, you have to suffer an unhappy childhood. Sometimes, the opposite is the case. As evidence, we have this photograph of Vladimir Nabokov, age eight. He sits on the porch at Vyra, the Nabokov summer home, studying a butterfly book and wearing a breathtaking pair of socks. As you can see, Vladimir was a rich kid. He came from an aristocratic family, had a father and a French governess. In 1917, the Russian Revolution ended all that. The boy you see here ceased to exist.

Or did he? Later, when he began to write in exile, Nabokov would draw again and again on the world of this photograph to derive his fiction. He would do so, however, not by writing *about* his lost Russia but by keeping in touch with the qualities of existence his childhood there had acquainted him with. Early on, Vladimir had discovered that he was synesthetic like his mother. For him, the color blue had a taste. Such doublings of consciousness marked his intellectual and aesthetic development. As a man, he set upon his writing with the attitude of the boy in this photograph: magisterially seated to peruse and dissect creation. The elegant wicker chair, the sprig of blossom in the windowsill, the fanciful summerhouse itself, these things accompanied the waking of Vladimir's sentient mind. Thereafter, his prose was full of their style and fragrance, if not their autobiographical presence.

All of Nabokov's novels reenact the discovery that the color blue has a taste.

Vladimir here is almost Lolita's age. His connoisseur's eye and screened pelvis foretell Humbert Humbert. This was before exile, before Nabokov's own father was shot and killed—tragedies Vladimir would write about, for the most part, *obliquely*, preferring to make his books like the one here in his lap: a collection of shimmering creatures, delicately pinned, each, in its journey from worm to butterfly, demonstrating the extravagant imagination of nature.

—**Jeffrey Eugenides**

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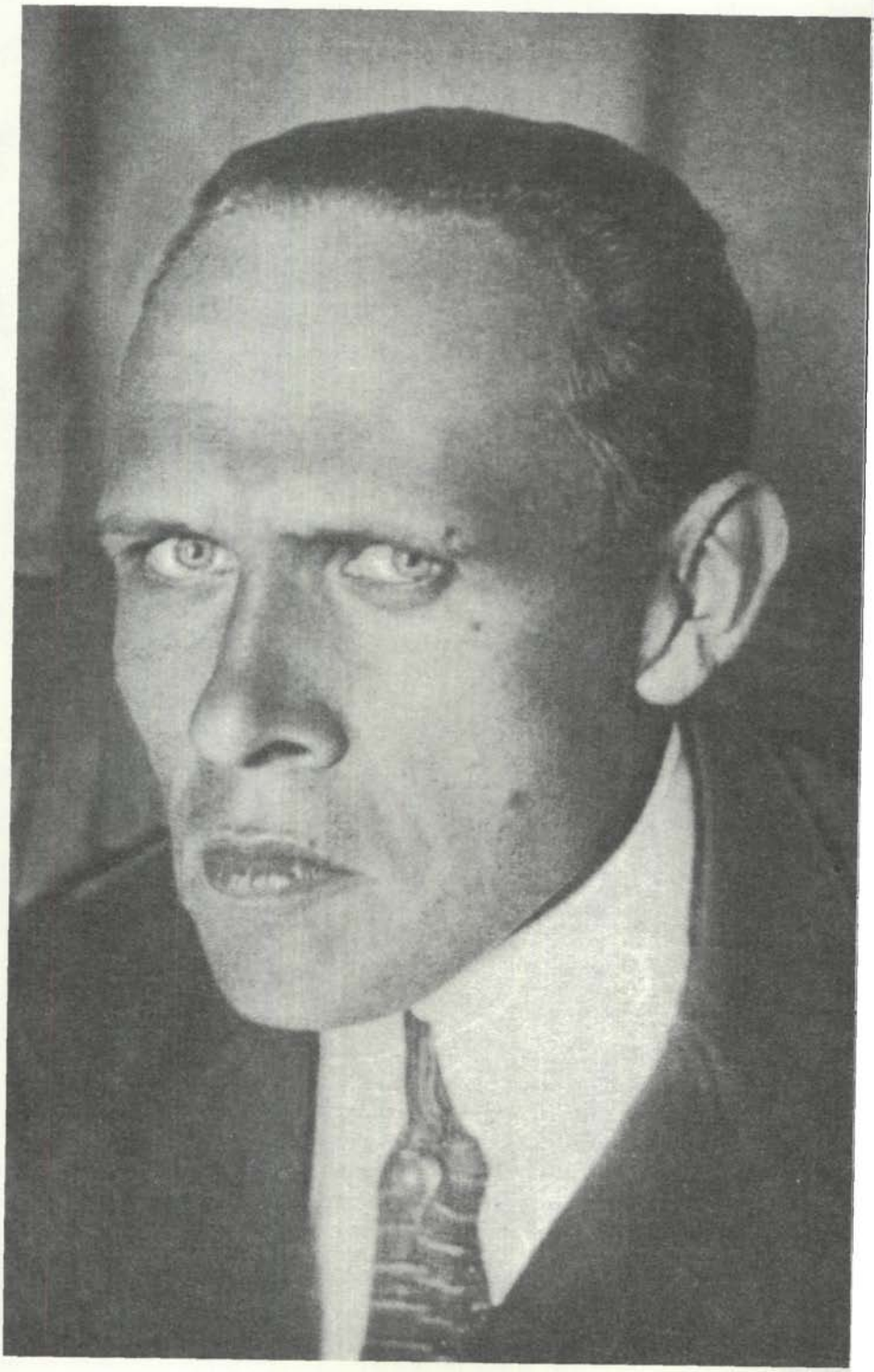

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Daniil Kharms

Among the millions killed by Stalin was one of the funniest and most original writers of the century, Daniil Kharms. After his death in prison in 1942 at the age of thirty-seven, his name and his work almost disappeared, kept alive in typescript texts circulated among small groups of people in the then Soviet Union. Practically no English-speaking readers knew of him. I didn't, until I went to Russia and came back and read books about it and tried to learn the language. My teacher, a young woman who had been in the U.S. only a few months, asked me to translate a short piece by Daniil Kharms as a homework assignment. The piece, "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin," appears in *СТАРУХА* (*Old Woman*), a short collection of Kharms's work published in Moscow in 1991. Due to my newness to the language and the two dictionaries and grammar text I had to use, my first reading of Kharms proceeded in extreme slow motion. As I wondered over the meaning of each word, each sentence; as the meaning gradually emerged, my delight grew. Every sentence was funnier than I could have guessed. A paragraph began: "Pushkin loved to throw rocks." Openings like that made me breathless to find out what would come next. The well-known difficulty of taking humor from one language into another has a lesser-known correlate: when, as sometimes happens, the translation succeeds, the joke can seem even funnier than it was to begin

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with. As I translated, I thought Kharms the funniest writer I had ever read.

His photograph facing the title page only confirmed this. At first glance he appeared crazy or fierce, but on closer inspection I could see the weirdness of a deeply funny guy. I wanted to know all I could about him. My teacher told me that he was a founding member of an artistic movement called OBERIU, that the name came from the first letters of the Russian words for Association for Real Art, that he and other members of the group fell into disfavor and were killed, that when she was little she knew him as the author of poems and stories for children. We read some of his writing for children, work as blithe and whimsical and heedless as the stories in *GTAPYXA* were dark. In *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, a selection edited and translated by George Gibian (1971), I learned that Kharms was born Daniil Ivanovich Yuvachev in Petersburg in 1905; that his father, an intellectual and revolutionary, had been imprisoned and exiled to Siberia; that with his father he shared an interest in stories of fantasy; that he suffered from melancholy; that he admired Gogol, Knut Hamsun and Bach. A colleague said of him, "Kharms is art." Much of his work consisted of public readings, pranks, performances and daring gestures. With the Bolsheviks in power and the nobility vanished or in prison, Kharms assumed the guise of an aristocrat, complete with false mustache and a briefcase containing his own personal silver drinking cups. To attract people to a reading performance of the OBERIU group, Kharms strolled on a fifth-floor ledge in Saint Petersburg smoking a pipe and loudly announcing the event to passersby.

In short, he was a cool guy, too funny for communism, or at any rate for Stalin's version of it. After the successful production of his play, *Elizabeth Bam*, a comedy about a woman who is waiting to be arrested and killed, the press attacked the OBERIU, later accusing them of "reactionary jugglerism" and "nonsense poetry . . . against the dictatorship of the proletariat." Police arrested him on the street in 1941; when his wife went to take him a package at the

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prison hospital in February, 1942, she was told that he had died two days before. Fourteen years after his death he was officially "rehabilitated." Bibliographies listed him only as an author of children's books. More recently, the larger outline of his work has begun to emerge; perhaps soon there will be a complete collection by which we can get to know him better. So far I have only scratched the surface on Kharms.

—**Ian Frazier**

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Anna Akhmatova

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Little Requiem

For someone a fresh breeze blows.
For someone the sunset luxuriates—
"Requiem" (Anna Akhmatova)

The reason confiscated. The reason nowhere to be
found. Blowing this very paper now
  out of my hands
if I would
  let it go—
The *reason-for*—something I'm waiting outside of, again
  today,
up at the fence, at the gate,
standing here very still—
And it is not gray, and it is not stone,
but gray small bushes—sage—with field of lupine all
around—the whimsical divine—no hint—behind it now the
  sun going
down—no hint—the beams tendentious, red—
at their lean-end laving the vast
  commemoration of
magenta which in these silent millions bends,
allowing wind-like bars of some insistent ditty
through . . .
No hint of what this holds inside it though.
Flame-pink, rose, crimson and small ugly purple mix.
There is a speckling where some clouds won't let
sun through. There is a clattering where over-much
of lupine breed and pure sun makes them happen
more. It pushes and invests. It loads them down with
happening. No back-of-the-mind allowed. All
front, inherent, tinted-through with being till you
have to care. No hint of
what is locked in there, although I too am made to come

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before it every day, and wait, and lean, and listen stilly for
  some news.
Something *was* led away at dawn.
Something was locked away.
And yet what's here—what's left behind—is hardly
what was promised—hardly *there*—hardly
(not to reduce the thing) not there—
(and if the man was young they killed his father)
(and if the man was married they took his wife)
(unto the next squad) (unto the quiet and
deserted hills) (so we dig in) (so they
dig in)—the children crying, the light dramatically now
  clattering on
across the once-again mint-condition-end-of-day—
the swatch of sky issuing commemorative-editions of. . . .
If I wait closely where I look,
there are, in bits and blips,
small anthems being sung. They're in the
register where everything is choked into the forced
  becoming visible—oh guards of the
imprisoned prisoner—no hint—no hint wherever my eye
scoops and rips—no hint in the pastels, in the shorn
  fabulation of
  space/time,
in the account field, light and color give—no hint what
  lisps
the windy promises of meaning in—
or what, withholding, under cover of form,
accepts, back-turned, breath-held,
the mild applause of miles of lupine,
the pleased crescendos where the eye joins lupine in
  the borrowings of light—
bowing, accepting raucousness
  where gaze and miles of weeds and seedpods
mix with wind—all of me now
standing on line, barely able to make out
what, there in the day, is held
against its will—

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not wanting to go deeper-in, really, of course,
no matter how much I love,
not wanting to stay out here, in the reddish glow,
in the lower-right-hand corner, any
longer, either—unrecognized—a lazy river
glowing in the middle distance—no, no,
it has been led away, *it* is being led away,
a chill on its brow, somewhere a candle blowing-out (but
by
mistake),
and in a front room something
crying, something pretending not to notice as
it's led away, is being led away, the sky now
aqua, and beyond—oh, beyond—no-color regions and
then the
disappointing sequel—nighthawks,
certainties, denials, triumph over sorrow, triumph
over pain.
The rest is darkness—no—the rest is optional.
Poking ahead, a little reasoning like insect-hum.
And then no sound.
In the dark, cells dividing, cells
dividing further . . .
Something remembers them always and everywhere.
Always and *everywhere*. How consent to that honor—

—**Jorie Graham**

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Sergei Yesenin

Not very deep in the well of the past, but over twenty years ago, I wrote a book called *Letters to Yesenin*, actual letters in the form of poems addressed to Yesenin because I was so far *in extremis* that I could think of no one else appropriate, somewhat in the manner of children who for periods can only communicate with imaginary friends.

What a bloody voyage before and since. But then it couldn't have been otherwise because that is what happened, and given enough energy we tend to evolve into what we actually are. The poems I wrote are still largely unbearable to me, and perhaps should be made into wallpaper for a psychoanalyst's office. I wrote Yesenin as a brother who had visited his death scene in St. Petersburg on a nasty hangover on a very cold autumn day, then took a long walk along the Nevsky Prospect to figure it out. But then the burden of the incomprehensible is still there. Despite all the tripery about "healing" we are permanently inconsolable, and to be less so would dishonor life.

Now, at this moment, looking at the photo of Yesenin holding the concertina, there is a jolt of melancholy caused by his expectant grin. His soul kept saying "a good time should be had by all." He crossed the fragile line between expecting nothing and wanting everything. He could never put out the fire in his hair. This young man drew water, milked cows, chopped wood, picked mushrooms, then went to the city as we all must, but never really went back home. His fabulous vices took him early, and it is not proper for us like some dweedling Greek chorus to pity him any more than we should Dylan Thomas, his cousin. He is Yesenin and he gave voice to the gods in him to keep them alive. You must remember, after all, that he is Yesenin. We shall hear his music until the planet dies.

—**Jim Harrison**

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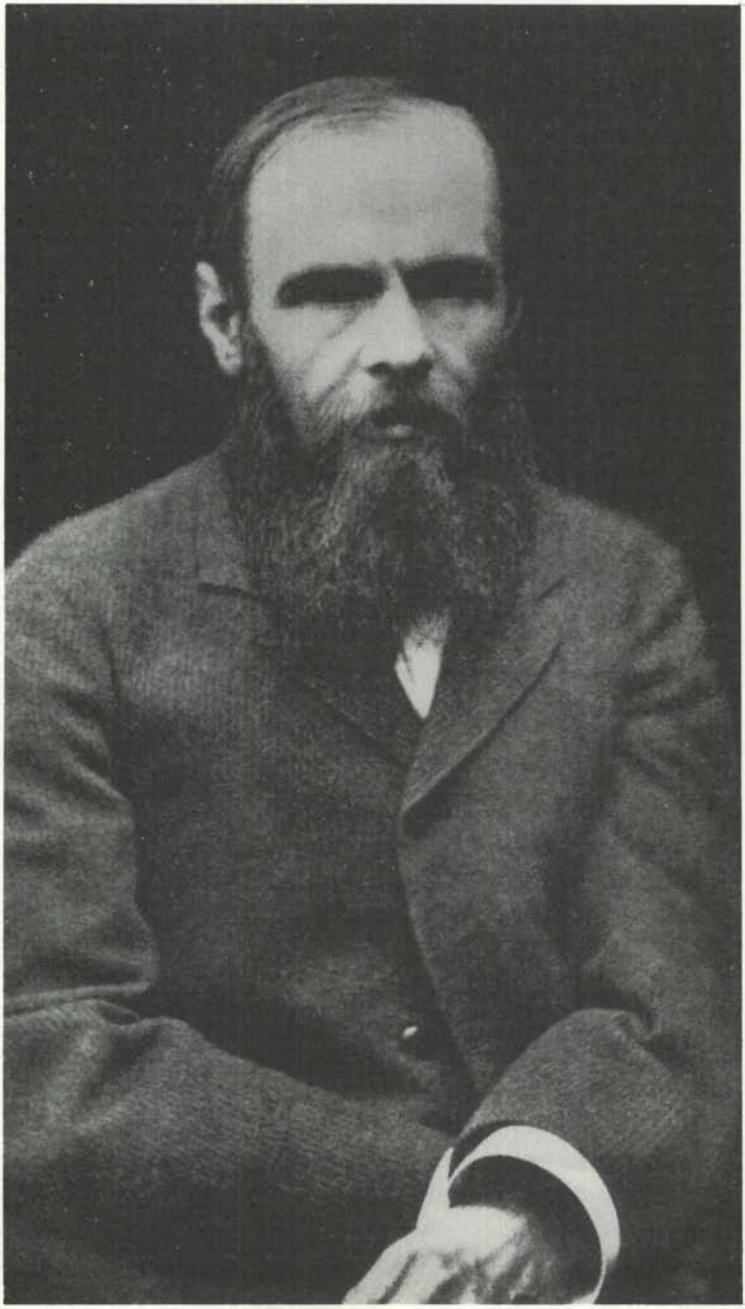

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Can it be said that there is something, some aspect of the human, that the fiction of Fyodor Dostoyevsky is *not* about? He is the great pioneer of the inner depths, who showed us how relentlessly the darkness mirrors us, if we only dare look down. *Now do you know?* asks Raskolnikov. *Now do you understand?* We edge toward the precipice, sound the hollows where consciousness roots for a soul. Then there are the Karamazovs, a personality split into its component passions and compulsions like some post-war negotiation. Dostoyevsky ignores none of our appetites, our ever contesting fidelities. We are brain, but also bowel; we harbor doubt and scorn like acids, but we long for belief; we want God, but we also crave power, love, meat. Who better than Dostoyevsky girds man for a modern literature that spares us nothing? Even here, he says, "*Look and do not flinch.*"

—Thom Jones

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Tolstoy and Chekhov

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this story since I don't remember where I read it or whether someone told it to me. Moreover, the photograph of Tolstoy and Chekhov in September, 1901, can hardly fit the occasion. That will be evident when we come to Chekhov's reference to snow. In any case, whether the photograph precedes, or, more likely, follows the meeting noted here, the way I received the tale is that Chekhov was invited to Yasnaya Polyana by Tolstoy, and when the two sat down to talk, Tolstoy delivered himself of the following speech:

"Chekhov, you are a very good writer. In fact, some of your short stories are excellent. They are very good indeed. There are even one or two that I would have been proud to have written."

Here, the grand old man, Russian deity of letters, chose to scowl, and scowled most severely. "Your plays!" he said. "We must speak of your plays. Why are you writing them? Chekhov, they are terrible. You should not continue giving yourself to such works. As a playwright, you are even worse than Shakespeare!"

In recall, this is Chekhov's report of the aftermath: "I drove to the train station over snow-covered roads. I whipped the horses. I beseeched them to go faster. Faster! And to the full moon I cried aloud: 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

—**Norman Mailer**

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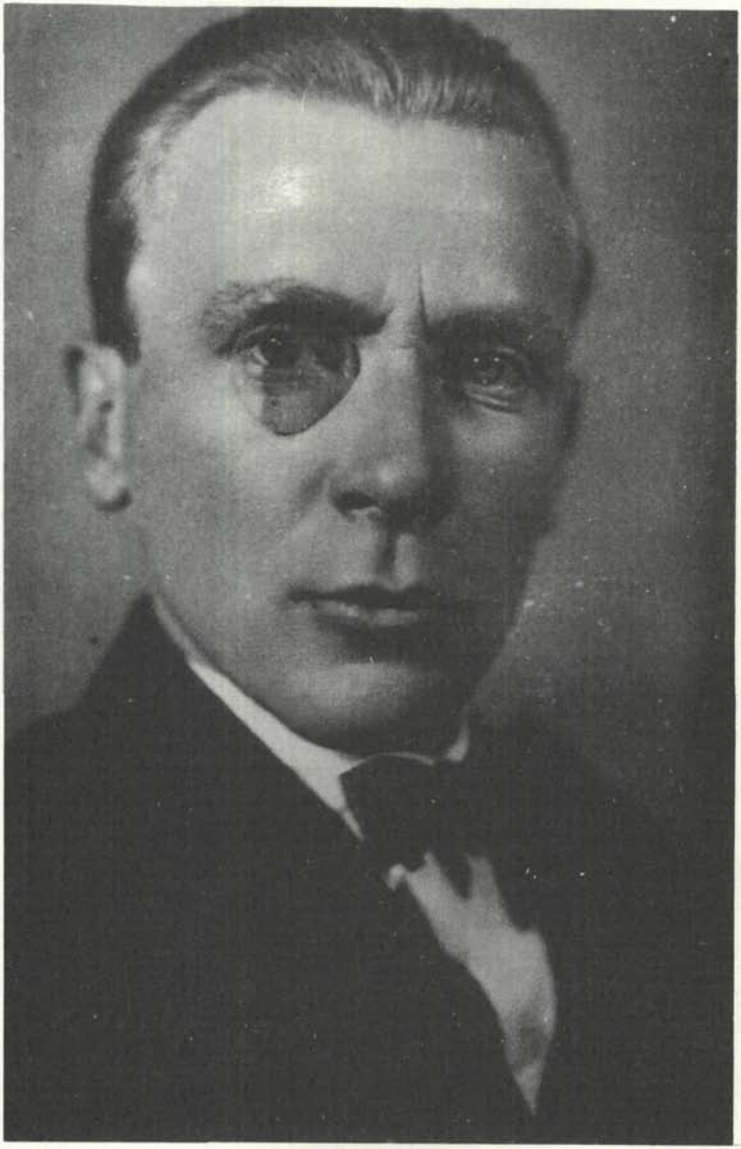

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Mikhail Bulgakov

This is the man who brought the Devil to Moscow. Born in Kiev in 1891, he graduated in medicine in 1916 and then specialized in the treatment of syphilis. Apparently he was not very good at it. A woman who had known him in his youth said: "What? Mishka Bulgakov—a famous writer? That incompetent venereologist—a famous Russian writer?" The germs of absurdity were even then present in the young Dr. Bulgakov. The leaky faucet in his consulting room often flooded out the people in the basement flat below. You can see it here, an antic spirit half-concealed behind the smug facade of a brisk, clever, successful young man. He was said to have a habit of pacing the room and tossing his hair back off his forehead, and to be caustic, ill-tempered and sarcastic. This too can be read in his features, in the steely penetration of that monocled eye, and the curl of those damply sensuous lips. They say his teeth were very strong.

By 1923 he had abandoned the syphilitics and moved to Moscow, where he wrote for the theater. He enjoyed early fame, and perhaps it's this that lends the impression of a certain mannered arrogance, born, surely, of an awareness of the burgeoning powers of an imagination of glorious heft and muscle? But we are still a dozen years away from *The Master and Margarita*, and those years will see Mishka Bulgakov becoming embittered by stringent censorship until, improbably, in the spring of 1932, Stalin himself telephones to tell him to go back to the Moscow Art Theater, all is forgiven.

The Master was finished in 1938. Bulgakov went blind in 1939. In 1940 he died. What does the face look like then, that razory intelligence first scalded with impotent fury at the state's constriction of his art, and the fury then sublimated in a masterpiece of irony about a fabulous, satanic, transhistorical figure of utter omnipotence? This satanic figure is the Devil Bulgakov brings to Moscow to wreak havoc in the lives of little people; to liberate a master-writer from the madhouse and reunite him with his beloved; and then, with his wild and crazy retinue, to climb into the night sky on horseback and ride away, back to the abyss whence he came. It is Stalin.

—**Patrick McGrath**

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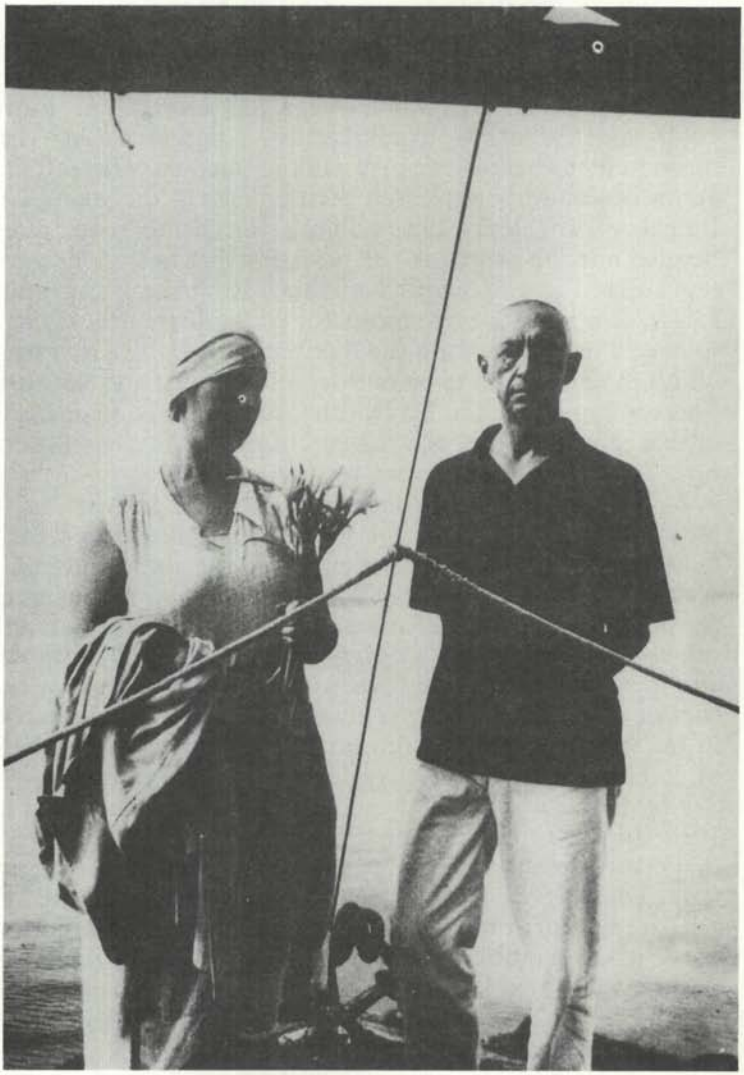

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Ivan Bunin

His long stories—or short novels—are tributes to the Russian countryside and its people, deep breaths taken on that old Russian theme, nostalgia inspired by the charms of nature. But his short stories are the jewels, containing novels within them. "The Gentleman from San Francisco" has mythic dimensions, not to mention a wonderful vision of an ocean liner crossing, both rapturous and disapproving. The neutral tone of "Dark Paths" serves up a moving tale of lost love in the tradition of Maupassant. His "Sunstroke" is the story of every passionate love affair—romantic, with a Chekhovian objectivity—all in eight pages.

Bunin writes *alongside* his subject. A last rendezvous is described as Conrad would have it "making its appeal through the senses." We smell the dry lime leaves, see the blue shadows on the snow, hear the creaking of the horses' harnesses, feel the sheer nightgown through skin . . . Though it is with sensuous detail that he writes, Bunin remains cerebral. Coolness of thought wins out over passionate expression. Still, lost love is always there, streaked across the windows "iridescent like mother-of-pearl from the rain and the sun."

His life? He was born of impoverished gentry. Unlike many contemporaries he did not write of politics. He began at a young age, was a follower of Tolstoy's, then mixed with Moscow literary society. He left Russia in 1918, never to return and until his death in 1953 in France never wrote of anything but of his motherland. He was the first Russian to receive the Nobel Prize in 1933. He accepted it as an award "bestowed on an exile." His books are not in print.

He traveled widely. Here he is with his second wife aboard an ocean liner. His brow is a characteristic blend of watchfulness and reluctant empathy. His ears are alert. Bunin was a good listener. His *Memories and Portraits* is astonishing for the personal polish he lends to the characterizations of some great artistic figures of his day—showing tender visits with an aging Tolstoy who tells him to remember "writing is not everything," the gap between the public and private Gorki, and his disgust with "the so-called poet" Mayakovski. And his memoir of his friend Chekhov is quite simply the most elegant and poignant portrait one writer has written about another ever.

—**Susan Minot**

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Vladimir Nabokov

Together they make a butterfly. Uncle Vasiliy Rukavishnikov and young Nabokov's mother serve as wings, and Vladimir himself is body and head. The boy's white shirt flows into his mother's sleeve, and the whiteness of his sock fuses with her skirts; beloved Uncle Ruka's knee (in nine years he'd be gone, *angina pectoris*) attaches to his nephew as he clasps him gently about waist, by wrist. The precocious lepidopterist has decided to cross his legs, and so their familial butterfly is swallowtailed. Although he hates his starched collar and Stresa (in *Speak, Memory* we hear about such matters), the shrewd sweetness in his face confirms his later assessment: "I probably had the happiest childhood imaginable."

And what of the butterfly effect? What of that theory he might not have known, but which he clearly anticipated? That when a butterfly flutters its wings in St. Petersburg, say, this movement will affect, in some minute but mathematically provable way, the weather in Ithaca, New York? Nabokov understood the intricate, utter connectedness of all particulars in nature—divine, human, beastly—with the precision of a scientist. He, among writers this century, was the greatest physicist of the human soul, assayer *extraordinaire* of its frailties and tensile strengths. Surely he recognized how Lolita's laughter was contiguous with Ada's postcoital giggles, surely knew how Van Veen's heavy breathing somehow carried through into the song of rhyming John Shade, when he invoked white butterflies turning lavender at dusk.

Back to the photograph. Squint and you'll see them set to fly—Elena a sumptuous ruffly lifter, with elbows cocked to take on air, Uncle Ruka supportive of the boy who readies himself to view his world, theirs and ours, from a universal vantage where once transparent things now are laughter in the light.

—**Bradford Morrow**

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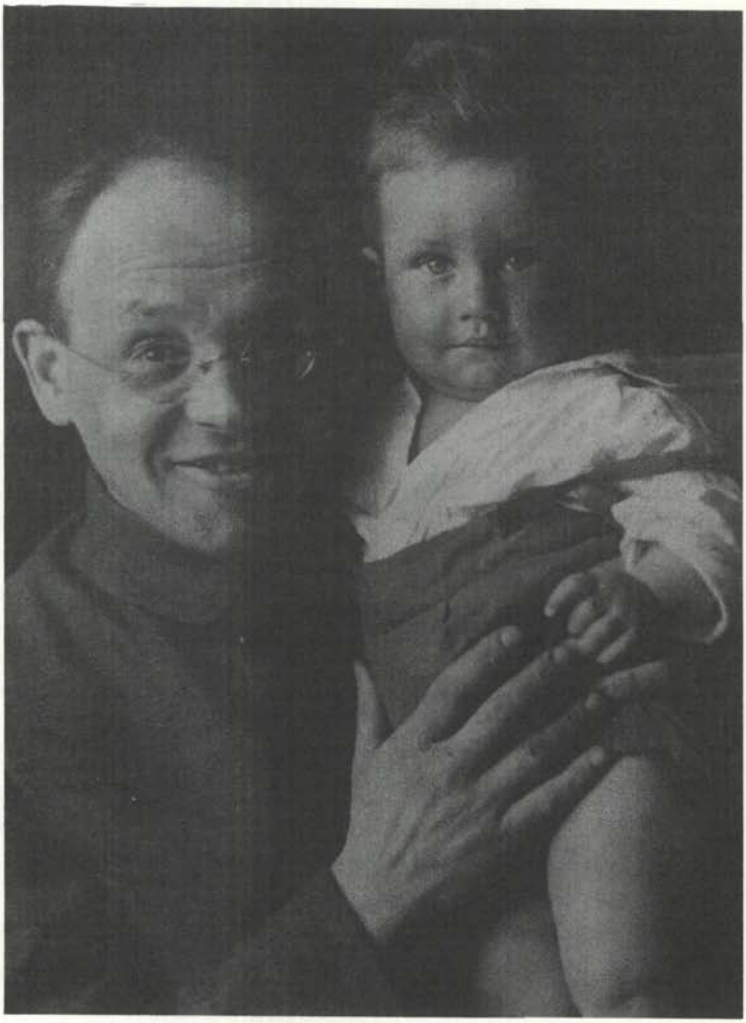

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Isaac Babel and his Daughter

I was filled with regret when I first discovered Isaac Babel's stories in 1975 or thereabouts. I had already written four books as well as stories of my own. Babel's stories were overwhelming. The regret I felt was that I had not read them earlier and been influenced by him.

It was Robert Phelps, a writer whose judgement of literature was unerring, who introduced me to Babel, even prescribing the stories I should read before making up my mind, *My First Goose*, *Dante Street*, *Guy de Maupassant* and *The King*.

I read them in a small, book-lined study that Phelps kept, separate from his apartment, on East Twelfth Street, and immediately fell under the spell of a writer I liked as much as any I had ever known.

Babel's reputation was originally based on *Red Cavalry* – stories drawn closely from his experience as a correspondent attached to Budenny's forces during the bloody civil conflict that followed the revolution of 1917–1918. The writing is brilliant, original and utterly unsentimental, marked by that telltale sign of greatness, keen observation. Every sentence is like an arrow thudding into the target, and Babel is stunningly succinct. His famous dictum states that no iron can pierce the human heart so chillingly as a period put in exactly the right place.

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I have reread the stories, some published long after his death in *The Atlantic*, *Commentary* and *The New Yorker*, many times. They are of an unquenchable freshness and somehow have—this is Babel's genius—despite their barbarity, an immense kindness of heart. Beyond the harshness they are filled with a perverse human nobility. They have the power to console. It is a quality one finds in Turgenev, Chekhov and Tolstoy.

Born in 1894, the son of a tractor salesman, Babel was raised in Odessa and later lived in Moscow and for brief periods in the 1920s and 1930s in Paris. He had two daughters, Nathalie and Lidya, by different wives. The photograph is of Babel and Nathalie, his oldest child, who was raised in France by her Russian mother and came to America where she taught and later edited her father's work. In Babel's kind face and high forehead, his wire-rimmed glasses, one can sense his personality: cheerful, shrewd and somewhat mischievous. There is a hint of his great wisdom. We cannot hear his voice, which was high-pitched and with a slight lisp, but from his letters and the recollections of his friends, Ilya Ehrenburg and Konstantin Paustovsky among others, one gains the picture of a wonderful man. I think of him agonizing over his work, "composing" as he liked to say, writing and rewriting. Half a page a day was a huge amount for him. I think of him living in Paris on a street called Villa Chauvelot, along the sea in the Fountains section of Odessa, and in meager lodgings in Moscow.

Like Pasternak, Mandelstam, Shalom Aleichem and it's not far-fetched to include Isaac Singer, Babel was Jewish. Strangely, he seems the least known though he may be the greatest of them. Fame is a vapor. Babel's compatriot, Bunin, a generation older, won the Nobel Prize but is little read today.

Babel was perhaps forty-six when he died. His exact fate remains unknown. Crushed by censorship and official disapproval, he was arrested in May 1939, towards the end of the terror, and disappeared into the prison camps. His trunk, which contained countless pages of unpublished work—he was famously long in revising and slow to submit stories—

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disappeared with him and has never been found. It, too, vanished in the pyre.

Stalin, who was responsible for the imprisonment or death of tens of millions of his countrymen, sometimes made unexpected telephone calls from his Kremlin office at night, to Pasternak and Ilya Ehrenburg among others. Ehrenburg received such a call after Babel had been arrested. Was Babel a good writer, Stalin asked him?

"A wonderful writer," Ehrenburg said.

Stalin's reply was a single word,

"*Zhalko*," he said—*pity*—and hung up.

That was the death knell.

—James Salter

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The three men on the left: Mayakovski, Pasternak, Eisenstein

Looking on a Russian Photograph, 1928/1995

It's the classic picture of doom. Three great poets stand together in 1928, the Revolution just a decade old, their hearts and brains soon to be dashed out on the rocks of Russian fascism, the flower of their achievements destined to be crushed by the new czar, Stalin.

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Eisenstein, Mayakovski, Pasternak—each will die in his own tortured way. Mayakovski, rebuffed in love, imprisoned in Moscow, will kill himself in 1930, at the age of thirty-six. Eisenstein's broken heart will give out in 1948, cherished projects betrayed, the fifty-year-old filmmaker persecuted abroad and closely watched at home. Pasternak, long denied by his government, will finally survive Stalin—yet, when his magnum opus, *Doctor Zhivago*, earns him the Nobel Prize in 1958, he will not be permitted to accept, his book burned, his name excoriated in his homeland.

But there they stand in 1928, brave young hearts, frozen in triumph, the last symbols of a civilization about to go mad. Yet I find myself thinking—how lucky they are, these three, able to experience lives of great crisis and choice. Were they not gifted with an energy that brought them each full-bore into what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called the "passion and peril of their times"?

We shall all lose, it is inevitable. The issue is how we lose, on what terms. These three men played out their lives across the dark landscape of a cursed country, each sought as a solace from a mad czar, who with quasi-Asiatic mind tortured them with the impossibility of reason.

I do not seek such death. I choose the milder climes of the U.S.A. circa the late twentieth century—although these times, less sinister certainly than Stalinist ones, may be equally dangerous—for what is in danger, in the largest sense, is the soul. And the soul that dies in its lifetime is the sterile, timid, cynical soul that is never tested by its time. Though tests too can be boredom. Luxury, television and the accelerating sameness of information can be far more ruthless than war or disease.

So I say—in death, rest. There is much time later to sleep. Until then party—party hard, suffer hard. Live lives suffused with cycles of joy and sorrow. Participate above all in the travails of your time, as artists your shoulders equal to all working and struggling people, neither higher nor lower—but equal to its spirit in its own time.

Vladimir Mayakovski, Sergei Eisenstein, Boris Pasternak—I salute you.

—**Oliver Stone**

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Leo Tolstoy

The horse labors under the weight of the writer's ego.

Tolstoy is posing for yet another photographer as he rides at Yasnaya Polyana, his country estate two hundred miles from Moscow. Artists come from all over Russia to paint him, sculpt him, photograph him, acolytes of his Christian pacifism sit at his feet, writers on pilgrimage bring him their books. He has in addition a wife and children and a staff of servants all of whom have strong ideas about what he should be doing at any given moment of his life. A moment after this picture is taken Tolstoy turns his horse into the woods. His destination is a lovely sunlit glade in a stand of white birch where he played as a child. There is a pond where small birds come to bathe. He goes to his glade to get away from everyone. He is at peace there. He thinks of death as peace, when he will no longer be visited by all the world, when the members of his domicile can no longer get at him, and when he will not be riven by the conflicts in his soul—an artillery officer in the Crimean War now a prophet of nonviolence, a champion of sexual appetites morally bound to a lifelong marriage, a world famous novelist who has given up fiction as a waste of time, an aristocratic landowner who dresses like a peasant. The glade where he goes for solace is where he wishes to be buried, in all modesty, in a simple unmarked grave . . . And so it will come to pass. We see the simple unmarked grave nearly a century later as, among busloads of tourists, we wend our way down a road under a vaulted nave of pine and birch, through which the wind sings like a choir. We come upon his glade lit now by the sun, pointedly, like a sign from God. And there it is, a sarcophagous covered with moss like the altar of a still to be defined religion—the colossally modest and most famous unmarked grave in the world. We take its picture.

—E.L. Doctorow

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Maxim Gorki

The copy of his photo has snow daubed all down the front of his coat as if he just recovered, puffing and shouting the word *bitter*, from a swan dive into a drift somewhere in the lower depths. Now he stands up again, blurred and speckled, and although I know he is erect on skis with a glove mounted like a revolutionary's head on both his ski poles, I see him differently: on a tightrope, waiting to fall, balanced on a railroad line, either arm wavering, the pole spikes jabbing air. On either side of him, out of sight, stands a villa, one on Capri, the other in Sorrento. Odd how the muckraking hobo craves a temple of azure sky and terra-cotta roofs. Registrar of the class wars, he thrived as an autobiographer who, freed of theory, flew best as an albatross warmed by the plumage of phenomenology. In other photos he looks like one of the Beats.

They say the police chief Yagoda, he who swallowed his own nail clippings, killed him with a murderous potion; not for Gorki the tiled floor of a room with a drain in the middle, an attentive final stare at the wall as the bullet begins its palpable journey into the back of his skull. He might just as well have broken his neck skiing. There he stands on his monorail, having drunk something vile, bareheaded, a semi-snowman, waiting to topple into a crevasse as deep as the planet, the bearer of two huge thumbtacks to Australia. He is thirty-four with something almost mincing in his frozen tough-guy gait. *Ski* to him was never a Russian ending.

—**Paul West**

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Chekhov, Pondering

Imagine Chekhov, at some point during the last weeks of his life, pondering old photographs. Imagine the dying man pausing over this image of his younger self. Consider the writer's possible responses, the clashing combinations of memory, observation, obsolete opinions, the present knowledge as he looks at himself sitting—*posing*, yes, definitely posing for the camera—on the steps of his country home in Melikhovo, little Khiva tucked in the crook of his arm.

Perhaps the older Chekhov would observe the younger Chekhov with irritated amusement. He might even wince at the pretensions suggested by the pose, since he is an expert critic of insincerity and has filled his fiction with misguided poseurs—lovers, industrialists, peasants and landowners—who treat the world as their showcase. See how the cane cuts neatly toward the center of the picture, the tips of his shoes gleam—these details might provoke him to think with some chagrin of the author who claimed to have ideas for 1036 stories, who was planning to write a novel "a hundred versts long," and who intended someday to visit Tahiti, Chicago and the Arctic. And yet the older Chekhov, I believe, would forgive his younger self. Always a man who valued modesty above publicity, and "good literary manners" above ambition, he shows us in his work that some form of pretension, even awkward pretension, is necessary to survive in a civilized society. When we lose interest in the theatrics of behavior, we are in danger of succumbing to pernicious boredom. At best we end up like Laevsky in "The Duel." At worst, we drift off with poor Andrei Yefimich in "Ward No. 6," muttering to the end, "It's all the same to me . . . I won't answer . . . It's all the same."

Or perhaps Chekhov would marvel at this man a decade younger than himself, grandson of serfs and at the age of thirty-seven already the author of such masterpieces as "The Steppe" and "Three Years." Perhaps he would wonder how he fulfilled all of the obligations that fell on him that decade, when he became caretaker for his parents and sister, when he

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served as the doctor for the local peasants and as squire of the village of Melikhovo and still managed to make the grueling trip across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin. He might recall his pattern of responsible moderation with more than a little pride, seeing in this portrait a man who devoted himself to the problems of others and yet could come close himself in his study for hours at a time, pick up his pen and hear the grass singing in his mind.

It could be, though, that the dying Chekhov would neither wince nor marvel at this picture but turn away in despair, comprehending more fully than ever before his own dishonesty. Here is Dr. Chekhov, villain of self-deception. What did it matter that he suffered his first bout of blood-spitting in 1884, shortly after graduating from medical school? What did it matter that for thirteen years, though he treated many victims of tuberculosis, he refused to identify the symptoms in himself? The disease probably would have progressed at the same speed even had he sought treatment earlier. But the lack of acknowledgement is troubling. If he'd been one of his characters, his pose of health would have revealed itself as a lie, and he would have seemed pathetic in his stubborn effort to make a lasting name for himself.

Of course, this Chekhov, the Chekhov lounging on the steps of his Melikhovo home, collar turned up just so, will be remembered: as the jaunty, brilliant writer, as the modest poseur and as a dying man unable to acknowledge his illness because the telling would have made death sensible. He preferred to tell of life.

—**Joanna Scott**

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Stories I Used to Write

David Means

I used to write stories that had lakes, that had deep blue waters shelled by the sky; water mucky and full of disease; I wrote stories where people used to break down and cry unbidden, unprovoked, just because of the way a stone looked when it was wet, or the way the wind ruffled the grass; the people in those stories might jump to violence unprovoked; they wore teal windbreakers and rolled packs of cigarettes into their T-shirts; some swore up and down to God Almighty and drank slugs from tall-boy beer cans (those were the same ones who might kick a mutt unprovoked, even kill it, the sharp snap of a dog's jaw breaking, the sound of a wooden chopstick being pried apart). I had characters who walked alone in dust-moted houses, plains pressing like gaping mouths against the windows, while they considered how to cope with abuses; furnaces popped on in basements, and there was always the sickly smell of fuel oil that saturated everything. I used to produce characters, American loners, who kicked walls and acted in deranged ways. I used to write with a raw, tight-lipped wonder at the way some folks stood their isolation on end and made long lazy afternoons into festivals of despair and desperation. And I never wondered where a story was going because it was always going to the same place, that little plot of land on the lake,

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lifting high with yellow weeds, and the smell of lighter fluid starting a barbecue next door where things were better and people partied with the kind of gusto that stunned, destroyed, obliterated; boats crashed on the lake in the dark, folks lost arms and limbs, yet in the morning light rising over the flat dead water there was always some solace; a flank of geese wedging south, the end of summer, some russet colors to the leaves, the seasons making headway; for in my stories there was always that much, at least, to go on. In some of these stories the smell of pine sap prevailed and there were stony backgrounds; nights were long and cold and characters rolled in discomfort; some of these cold folks wore double socks and rubbed their hands together frantically trying to generate enough friction, as if they hoped to start a fire of their own flesh. Others felt the cold steel of a snub-nosed gun against their inside waistband, or the fine edge of a carbon blade as it came out of leather, knowing damn well I'd make use of that later because no matter what, they bowed to me and to me only when it came down to endings and resolutions and those swooping lines that plots are supposed to draw. And if the grace of God came into things it was stupid luck, blind luck, a car pulling to the shoulder in time.

Only once did it all fail me and the control I had lost hold and this poor girl named Sandy found herself alone without anything; she was there, at the lake, oiled up with Hawaiian Tropic, her hair so blond it seemed blue in sunlight that tore holes in the sky; it was, the story said, a perfect day in that part of Michigan, and she was just out of college for the summer, reading paperbacks, seeing a guy named Tony who was working as a roofer over the vacation and at Michigan State in communications, and had a great future ahead of him; she was there on the dock alone, the whole day spread wide open; a slight fuzzy hue of gnats already swirling; the slop of water against the pylons (I'd used this same dock in better stories, stories in my own control) but there she was simply and gracefully succumbing to the day, the setting, her own plot which was, as much as I could tell, just simply a young woman from a small Michigan town on a dock—thinking for no particular reason about her father's office, a small insurance firm downtown, a squat building with three glass windows making up

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the front burning brilliant, flashing, as you drove down Main Street. She thought of her father in there working, now, as she lay on the dock, and of Main as her street—that central artery running through the town, through her body. But she lost me (or I lost her) when she put that aside and stood up and adjusted the tight straps of her bathing suit; she tightened up the shoulder straps, became conscious of her breasts, firm and just big enough (Tony says), her nipples flat and warm from the heat (it is a simple black suit, modeled after the ones used in the Olympics, the kind her mother used to wear that is now back in style); she tilts her chin towards the sky and looks long and hard for nothing at all—except there is a thin vapor stream from a jet working at an angle, as if driving straight into space, making her suddenly aware of the dome shape of the sky; behind her is that haze of crickets and insects that seem to have jumped ahead of the day and are ill-advisedly celebrating nightfall hours early. That's the feeling in the air as she stands and looks out over the water during what will become the last ten minutes of her life not only as a character but as a soul because she's mine and my soul, and not only did I make her but she made me—she gets, standing there, that feeling you get in the summer on hot, hot days, of impending evening, a feeling that rises up shortly after two o'clock when the sun, having reached its summer zenith, begins the slow descent into the pines and maples and ragweeds tearing up the edge of the land; the vacant lot behind the cottage seething with dry brittle sounds; fences that lead nowhere. Her body is long and sleek and in a way has reached a zenith (the extra two pounds aside) of perfection that she is aware of fully; she feels hairless and slick and ready to slide into the water, to slip into it, soundlessly, to become part of it; her legs are long and (Tony says) fine, shaved smooth just the night before, oiled down. She ran the flat of her palm along the top of her leg amazed at the sharpness of it; then, straightening herself, she pressed her arms flat to the sides of her thighs, lifted up onto her toes, considered her trajectory and the depth of the lake at the end of the dock, and, out of my control, launched herself into the horizon.

She takes three strong breaststrokes forward; the muscles of her shoulder blades flex and swell—she used to swim on

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the high-school team, and at State she's been doing laps at the pool every other day; I used to attend her high-school meets. The clean smell of chlorine; the reverberated noise of splashing and cheers and the shrill pierces of whistles. The tight snaps of swim caps against the scalp; the round faces and arms waiting for the start signal; the silence before the start, hollow and prayerful, opening over the bright white ceiling—for that sound, I think, seeing her swim out into the lake—for that sound she participated in that sport, that moment of silence before each race when even the feet stopped shuffling, the utter respect for that silence everyone in the room had—as if that silence itself might somehow deepen the experience of the race (you sweat underwater, she explained, you sweat a lot when you're swimming hard); and maybe taking four more strokes out into the lake she was considering that silence, or maybe wanting to find it before Tony showed up. He had long black hair and agate eyes; he walked with a sway to his shoulders as if he were yoked with muscles. He would test his muscle definition, thoughtlessly flexing and weighing when he talked. His voice was deepened by cigarette smoke; he used to drive cars for fun, make black tire tracks as he peeled out; now he's coming around—settled into a harder adult self. Maybe that was it. She was twenty yards out; the lake was shallow, warm, mucky. To get beneath the warmth you had to dive down five feet, get under the speckled flaccid water to something clearer.

In the stories I used to write she would have lain on her back and examined the vapor trail, maybe making up a story to go with it, people on a United flight from Chicago to New York, making a transfer at Kennedy to Iberia, from there to Madrid; from Madrid down to a fishing village she knew about (her ideal locale of silence); the vapor trail would be ragged and failing against the raw blue sky, torn away by high air currents; she'd float a while on her back until Tony came, sneaking to the end of the dock and suddenly bursting into the water with a loud hoot—they'd swim together, entwine legs, make love upstairs in the cottage on a day-cot, or a swing; the smell of wet wicker, of dried lake muck on reed rugs. In the stories I used to write Tony would wait until after sex to dump her; she'd barely hear what he had to say; he'd blow

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the smoke sidelong from his tight lips as if pushing his harsh words out of a one-way valve; he'd get up and leave, gunning his car, roaring off into the crickets, and she'd be left to waken in the morning to a new self—to use her VISA card to buy that ticket from Grand Rapids to Chicago; Chicago to New York; New York to Madrid; you'd see her in the final scene toting her carry-ons, going through the carpeted tube into the plane, or maybe toeing the late-afternoon sand on a Spanish beach, the jet lag numbing her bones. In the stories I used to write the ending would be neither happy nor sad; you'd be driven to go back for clues, for gentle hints of her future; you'd be the soothsayer, the story, the crystal ball, no word out of place.

But in this she's in the water several yards out with her hair floating behind her head like spilled ink, staring high up, up into the deep, endless sky with the water in her ears making the sound of her breathing electronic when the cramp strikes; it's more than a charley horse, a vast tightening along both of those perfect calves, radiating up to her stomach; inside her muscle tissues the chemicals that normally strike a sweet balance are now off, burning, acids, the cells rebelling, and she knows it—is aware of it fully; she tightens into a ball to work it out—it's as if the perfection she felt in her body on the dock is still there asking to be kneaded into shape by her panicked hands. She's had cramps before in swimming; bad ones; ones where she had to clutch the side of the pool while her teammates pulled her out of the water and held her like a crying child, smoothing back her hair while she tried not to scream; she ate bananas to ward them off, took vitamins, did arduous stretching exercises before each race. She remembers one in particular after a race, the coach looking down at her with concern, rubbing his locked hands downward—or was it upward?—to ease the muscles of their chemical burden in the white shrill heat of the overhead lamps; the wet splash of the sounds of the tiles; the hush of the feeble audience as they waited for her to stand up. But this, in the lake, is bad. She's maybe twenty yards out—the seething in the grass rising and falling as she comes up out of the water to take air and then sinks back down to work on the legs; for that first minute she's sure that in some way she'll ease out of the cramps, get

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them rubbed away before her oxygen goes and she begins to burn muscle tissue, to live off her own flesh—and perhaps that's part of the problem; she's so determined to save herself, to go through logical steps of getting her body back so her legs will move and she'll be able to get above the surface, that she forgets she's in one of my stories; she's taken off on me; she's more concerned about living than about being alive; she's panicked past the point of remembering—because that's what she's supposed to do, remember some point in her past vividly, wag her arms, make it to the dock and pull herself breathing heavily out of the water; lie back gasping for breath, crying at the shrill beauty of the sky. Tony will pull up right then. He'll swagger down to the dock. He'll ask what's wrong, and she'll know from his voice that he doesn't understand; that she can no longer go on with this young boy in a man's body, who with his cigarettes and his muscles just doesn't cut it; she'll look at him through squint-eyes, see his hair long and greasy falling down at his temples, and she'll just know; it will be she who says the words later, after lovemaking, when there is a cool after-storm dampness in the air. She'll end it. And then he'll roar hell-bent into the night leaving her in that late-night silence that falls in summer when even the crickets are tired. So long Tony, she'll say to herself. Then she'll walk on bare feet over the moss down to the dock. She'll dive into the simmering blackness along the same trajectory she charted out that afternoon; unafraid and fearless, striking out into the darkness flashing the flanks of her elbows.

But this is sadder than all of those stories I used to write, and I'm sorry for it. The lake, so useful in the past, no longer works for me. A floating body—dead or alive—is a thing to ponder; the air puckers up along the backside of the black bathing suit in a big bubble; the nylon fabric on top has already dried slightly gray in the hot sun. Her hair flays out behind her and parts to show the white of her scalp; there are slight perceptible movements, her legs and arms, from the wavelets—it's one of those days when the surface of the lake seems to be rubbed slightly alive by the sky, calm as glass out further where usually there are waves, riffed close to shore. What gives the truth away I guess is her position overall, against the pylon of the dock, slightly to one side, where Tony

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finds her when he comes down calling her name all the way over the hill, his voice softer than you'd expect, his hair short, actually, and his walk careful and gentle; he's wearing tennis shoes and cutoff shorts and a white T-shirt with nothing in the sleeves. Only partway down the hill he stops, pauses, knows what he sees right away and is unable to decide how to act; in the movies he'd dash down and tear her from the water and take his mouth and put it on hers and attempt to get her alive no matter how dead he damn well knew she was; he'd shake her and cry. But this Tony moves very slowly back into the cottage and calls 911 first; he's frozen up there on the porch, the wind picking up now with late-afternoon gusts, the clouds gathering and the vapor trail long gone. The grief he is feeling is moving in slowly, gathering its arms into his skull. In the stories I used to write he would have done something, anything, to relieve this grief; he'd throw his car into reverse and drive all night, up the palm of the state to the U.P., build a campfire on the hard-stoned beach, watch the lights of freighters against the darkness of Lake Superior. Or he'd simply leave the car there still running, an old puke-green Monte Carlo, and walk the trail that goes around the lake all night, walk it all the next day, and keep walking until, finally, his sister-in-law Marcy came to take him home. We'd know then that it was over and that it was up to us to make sense of it, to go back over it all and to find the meaning in the event. But with this we're left confused and bewildered by Tony on the porch wondering what to do now; because in this story she went down simply, alone, with nothing better to do it seems and against all odds; whatever she ate or didn't eat, whatever other factors came along to cause those cramps just don't matter to me; I'm alone with this; it's beyond anything I've ever seen. All I know is that the lake is still there, and early in the morning you'll see the bass boats working slowly along the good side. You won't see a girl named Sandy there anymore; or a guy named Tony. If you see anything, you'll see words out of place; events that don't fit. Things that just don't make sense no matter how hard you look, and how long, too.

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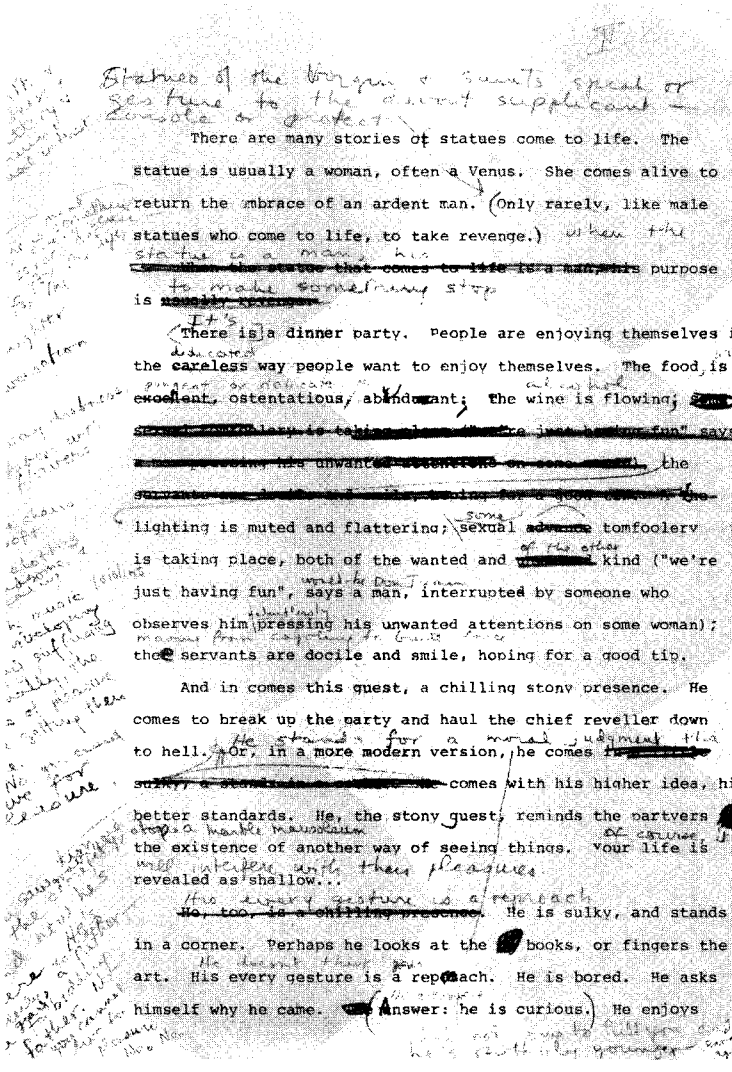

There are many stories of statues come to life. The statue is usually a woman, often a Venus. She comes alive to return the embrace of an ardent man. (Only rarely, like male statues who come to life, to take revenge.)

There is a dinner party. People are enjoying themselves in the careless way people want to enjoy themselves. The food is excellent, ostentatious, abundant; the wine is flowing; the lighting is muted and flattering; sexual tomfoolery is taking place, both of the wanted and kind ("we're just having fun", says a man, interrupted by someone who observes him pressing his unwanted attentions on some woman); the servants are docile and smile, hoping for a good tip.

And in comes this guest, a chilling stony presence. He comes to break up the party and haul the chief reveller down to hell. Or, in a more modern version, he comes comes with his higher idea, his better standards. He, the stony guest, reminds the partyers of the existence of another way of seeing things. Your life is revealed as shallow...

He, too, is a chilling presence. He is sulky, and stands in a corner. Perhaps he looks at the books, or fingers the art. His every gesture is a reproach. He is bored. He asks himself why he came. (Answer: he is curious.) He enjoys

A manuscript page from an early draft of Susan Sontag's The Volcano Lover.

Photograph opposite: Sarajevo, July 1993, in the sub-basement bomb-shelter/editorial office of the daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje*.

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Susan Sontag

The Art of Fiction CXLIII

Susan Sontag was interviewed in her Manhattan apartment on three blisteringly hot days in July, 1994. She had been traveling back and forth to Sarajevo—she has now been there nine times—and it was gracious of her to set aside time for the interview. Sontag is a prodigious talker—candid, informal, learned, ardent—and each day at a wooden kitchen table held forth for seven and eight-hour stretches. The kitchen is a mixed-use room, but the fax machine and the photocopier were silent; the telephone seldom rang. The conversation ranged over a vast array of subjects—later the texts would be scoured and revised—but always returned to the pleasures and distinctions of literature. Sontag is interested in all things concerning writing—from the mechanism of the process to the high nature of the calling. She has many missions, but foremost among them is the vocation of the writer.

Sontag was born in 1933 in New York City, grew up in Arizona and later, Southern California. She graduated from high school at fifteen, attended Berkeley for a year, graduated from the University of Chicago (1951) and received two M.A.s

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from Harvard: one in English (1954), one in philosophy (1955). In 1950, she married Philip Rieff, with whom she had a son, the writer David Rieff; the marriage lasted nine years. Since 1957, when she spent a year in France, Sontag has often lived abroad, though New York City has generally served as her base. In the early sixties she taught philosophy and the history of religion at various universities, but since then has eschewed academic life. She has won many awards and fellowships, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for On Photography, *and a five-year MacArthur Fellowship.*

Sontag has published fifteen books, including the novels The Benefactor *(1963),* Death Kit *(1967) and* The Volcano Lover *(1992), a collection of short stories,* I, etcetera *(1978) and three collections of essays:* Against Interpretation *(1966),* Styles of Radical Will *(1969) and* Under the Sign of Saturn *(1980).* On Photography, *a collection of related essays, was published in 1977.* A Susan Sontag Reader *appeared in 1982.* Illness as Metaphor *(1978) and its companion volume,* AIDS and Its Metaphors *(1989), anatomize the putative uses of metaphors for tuberculosis, cancer and* AIDS *in our culture. Her latest work is a play employing elements from the life of Alice James entitled* Alice in Bed *(1993). Sontag has also written and directed four films*—Duet for Cannibals *(1969),* Brother Carl *(1971),* Promised Lands *(1974) and* Unguided Tour *(1983)*—*and edited and introduced writings by Antonin Artaud (1976), Roland Barthes (1981) and, most recently, Danilo Kiš (1995), as well as written prefaces to books by Robert Walser (1982), Marina Tsvetaeva (1983), Machado de Assis (1990) and Juan Rulfo (1995), among others.*

Sontag lives in a sparsely furnished five-room apartment on the top floor of a building in Chelsea on the west side of Manhattan. Books—as many as fifteen thousand—and papers are everywhere. A lifetime could be spent browsing through the books on art and architecture, theater and dance, philosophy and psychiatry, the history of medicine and the history of religion, photography and opera and so on. The various European literatures—French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, etc., as well as hundreds of books of Japanese literature

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and books on Japan—are arranged by language in a loosely chronological way. So is American literature as well as English literature, which runs from Beowulf *to, say, James Fenton. Sontag is an inveterate clipper, and the books are filled with scraps of paper ("each book is marked and filleted," she says), the bookcases festooned with notes scrawled with the names of additional things to read.*

Sontag usually writes by hand on a low marble table in the living room. Small theme notebooks are filled with notes for her novel-in-progress, In America. *An old book on Chopin sits atop a history of table manners. The room is lit by a lovely Fortuny lamp, or a replica of one. Piranesi prints decorate the wall (architectural prints are one of her passions).*

Everything in Sontag's apartment testifies to the range of her interests, but it is the work itself, like her conversation, that demonstrates the passionate nature of her commitments. She is eager to follow a subject wherever it leads, as far as it will go—and beyond. What she has said about Roland Barthes is true about her as well: "It was not a question of knowledge . . . but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what could *be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention."*

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin writing?

SUSAN SONTAG

I'm not sure. But I know I was self-publishing when I was about nine: I started a four-page monthly newspaper, which I hectographed (a very primitive method of duplication) in about twenty copies and sold for five cents to the neighbors. The paper, which I kept going for several years, was filled with imitations of things I was reading. There were stories, poems and two plays that I remember, one inspired by Čapek's *R.U.R.*, the other by Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria de Capo*. And accounts of battles—Midway, Stalingrad and so on; re-

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member, this was 1942, 1943, 1944—dutifully condensed from articles in real newspapers.

INTERVIEWER

We've had to postpone this interview several times because of your frequent trips to Sarajevo which, you've told me, have been one of the most compelling experiences of your life. I was thinking how war recurs in your work and life.

SONTAG

It does. I made two trips to North Vietnam under American bombardment, the first of which I recounted in "Trip to Hanoi," and when the Yom Kippur War started in 1973 I went to Israel to shoot a film, *Promised Lands*, on the front lines. Bosnia is actually my third war.

INTERVIEWER

There's the denunciation of military metaphors in *Illness as Metaphor*. And the narrative climax of *The Volcano Lover*, a horrifying evocation of the viciousness of war. And when I asked you to contribute to a book I was editing, *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art*, the work you chose to write about was Goya's *The Disasters of War*.

SONTAG

I suppose it could seem odd to travel to a war, and not just in one's imagination—even if I do come from a family of travelers. My father, who was a fur trader in northern China, died there during the Japanese invasion: I was five. I remember hearing about "world war" in September 1939, entering elementary school, where my best friend in the class was a Spanish Civil War refugee. I remember panicking on December 7, 1941. And one of the first pieces of language I ever pondered over was "for the duration"—as in "there's no butter for the duration." I recall savoring the oddity, and the optimism, of that phrase.

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INTERVIEWER

In "Writing Itself," on Roland Barthes, you express surprise that Barthes, whose father was killed in one of the battles of the First World War (Barthes was an infant) and who, as a young man himself, lived through the Second World War—the Occupation—never once mentions the word *war* in any of his writings. But your work seems haunted by war.

SONTAG

I could answer that a writer is someone who pays attention to the world.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote of *Promised Lands*: "My subject is war, and anything about any war that does not show the appalling concreteness of destruction and death is a dangerous lie."

SONTAG

That prescriptive voice rather makes me cringe. But . . . yes.

INTERVIEWER

Are you writing about the siege of Sarajevo?

SONTAG

No. I mean, not yet, and probably not for a long time. And almost certainly not in the form of an essay or report. David Rieff, who is my son, and who started going to Sarajevo before I did, has published such an essay-report, a book called *Slaughterhouse*—and one book in the family on the Bosnian genocide is enough. So I'm not spending time in Sarajevo to write about it. For the moment it's enough for me just to be there as much as I can: to witness, to lament, to offer a model of non-complicity, to pitch in. The duties of a human being, one who believes in right action, not of a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always want to be a writer?

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SONTAG

I read the biography of Madame Curie by her daughter Eve Curie when I was about six, so at first I thought I was going to be a chemist. Then for a long time, most of my childhood, I wanted to be a physician. But literature swamped me. What I really wanted was every kind of life, and the writer's life seemed the most inclusive.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any role models as a writer?

SONTAG

Of course I thought I was Jo in *Little Women*. But I didn't want to write what Jo wrote. Then in *Martin Eden* I found a writer-protagonist with whose writing I could identify, so then I wanted to be Martin Eden—minus, of course, the dreary fate Jack London gives him. I saw myself as, I guess I was, a heroic autodidact. I looked forward to the struggle of the writing life. I thought of being a writer as a heroic vocation.

INTERVIEWER

Any other models?

SONTAG

Later, when I was thirteen, I read the journals of André Gide, which described a life of great privilege and relentless avidity.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember when you started reading?

SONTAG

When I was three, I'm told. Anyway, I remember reading real books—biographies, travel books—when I was about six. And then free fall into Poe and Shakespeare and Dickens and the Brontës and Victor Hugo and Schopenhauer and Pater, and so on. I got through my childhood in a delirium of literary exaltations.

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INTERVIEWER

You must have been very different from other children.

SONTAG

Was I? I was good at dissembling, too. I didn't think that much about myself, I was so glad to be on to something better. But I so wanted to be elsewhere. And reading produced its blissful, confirming alienations. Because of reading—and music—my daily experience was of living in a world of people who didn't give a hoot about the intensities to which I had pledged myself. I felt as if I were from another planet—a fantasy borrowed from the innocent comic books of that era, to which I was also addicted. And of course I didn't really have much sense of how I was seen by others. Actually, I never thought people were thinking of me at all. I do remember—I was about four— a scene in a park, hearing my Irish nanny saying to another giant in a starched white uniform, "Susan is very high-strung," and thinking, "That's an interesting word. Is it true?"

INTERVIEWER

Tell me something about your education.

SONTAG

All in public schools, quite a number of them, each one more lowering than the one before. But I was lucky to have started school before the era of the child psychologists. Since I could read and write I was immediately put into the third grade, and later I was skipped another semester, so I was graduated from high school—North Hollywood High School—when I was still fifteen. After that, I had a splendid education at Berkeley, then in the so-called Hutchins College of the University of Chicago, and then as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard and Oxford. I was a student for most of the 1950s and I never had a teacher from whom I didn't learn. But at Chicago, the most important of my universities, there were not just teachers I admired but three to whose influence

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I gratefully submitted: Kenneth Burke, Richard McKeon and Leo Strauss.

INTERVIEWER

What was Burke like as a teacher?

SONTAG

Completely inside his own enthralling way of unpacking a text. He spent almost a year with the class reading Conrad's *Victory* word by word, image by image. It was from Burke that I learned how to read. I still read the way he taught me. He took some interest in me. I had already read some of his books before he was my teacher in Humanities III; remember, he wasn't well-known then and he'd never met an undergraduate who had read him while still in high school. He gave me a copy of his novel, *Towards a Better Life*, and told me stories about sharing an apartment in Greenwich Village in the 1920s with Hart Crane and Djuna Barnes—you can imagine what that did to me. He was the first person I met who had written books that I owned. (I except an audience I was roped into with Thomas Mann when I was fourteen years old, which I recounted in a story called "Pilgrimage.") Writers were as remote to me as movie stars.

INTERVIEWER

You had your B.A. from the University of Chicago at eighteen. Did you know by then you would become a writer?

SONTAG

Yes, but I still went to graduate school. It never occurred to me that I could support myself as a writer. I was a grateful, militant student. I thought I would be happy teaching, and I was. Of course, I had been careful to prepare myself to teach not literature, but philosophy and the history of religion.

INTERVIEWER

But you taught only through your twenties, and have refused countless invitations to return to university teaching. Is

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this because you came to feel that being an academic and being a creative writer are incompatible?

SONTAG

Yes. Worse than incompatible. I've seen academic life destroy the best writers of my generation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mind being called an intellectual?

SONTAG

Well, one never likes to be called anything. And the word makes more sense to me as an adjective than as a noun, though, even so, I suppose there will always be a presumption of graceless oddity—especially if one is a woman. Which makes me even more committed to my polemics against the ruling anti-intellectual cliches: heart versus head, feeling versus intellect, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

SONTAG

That's one of the few labels I'm content with. But even so . . . is it a noun? I doubt it.

INTERVIEWER

What women writers have been important to you?

SONTAG

Many. Sei Shōnagon, Austen, George Eliot, Dickinson, Woolf, Tsvetayeva, Akhmatova, Elizabeth Bishop, Elizabeth Hardwick . . . the list is much longer than that. Because women are, culturally speaking, a minority, with my minority consciousness I always rejoice in the achievement of women. With my writer's consciousness, I rejoice in any writer I can admire, women writers no more or less than men.

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INTERVIEWER

Whatever the models of a literary vocation that inspired you as a child, I have the impression that your adult idea of a literary vocation is more European than American.

SONTAG

I'm not so sure. I think it's my own private brand. But what is true is that, living in the second half of the twentieth century, I could indulge my Europhile tastes without actually expatriating myself, while still spending a lot of my adult life in Europe. That's been my way of being an American. As Gertrude Stein remarked, "What good are roots if you can't take them with you?" One might say that's very Jewish, but it's also very American.

INTERVIEWER

Your third novel, *The Volcano Lover*, seems to me a very American book, even though the story it tells takes place in eighteenth-century Europe.

SONTAG

It is. Nobody but an American would have written *The Volcano Lover*.

INTERVIEWER

And *The Volcano Lover*'s subtitle: "A Romance." That's a reference to Hawthorne, right?

SONTAG

Exactly. I was thinking of what Hawthorne says in the preface to *The House of Seven Gables*: "When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he been writing a novel." My imagination is very marked by nineteenth-century American literature—first by Poe, whom I read at a precocious age and whose mixture of speculativeness,

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fantasy and gloominess enthralled me. Poe's stories still inhabit my head. Then by Hawthorne and Melville. I love Melville's obsessiveness. *Clarel*, *Moby-Dick*. And *Pierre*—another novel about the terrible thwarting of a heroic solitary writer.

INTERVIEWER

Your first book was a novel, *The Benefactor*. Since then you've written essays, travel narratives, stories, plays, as well as two more novels. Have you ever started something in one form and then changed it to another?

SONTAG

No. From the beginning I always know what something is going to be: every impulse to write is born of an idea of form, for me. To begin I have to have the shape, the architecture. I can't say it better than Nabokov did: "The pattern of the thing precedes the thing."

INTERVIEWER

How fluent are you as a writer?

SONTAG

I wrote *The Benefactor* quickly, almost effortlessly, on weekends and during two summers (I was teaching in the Department of Religion at Columbia College); I thought I was telling a pleasurably sinister story that illustrated the fortune of certain heretical religious ideas that go by the name of Gnosticism. The early essays came easily, too. But writing is an activity that in my experience doesn't get easier with practice. On the contrary.

INTERVIEWER

How does something get started for you?

SONTAG

It starts with sentences, with phrases, and then I know something is being transmitted. Often it's an opening line. But sometimes I hear the closing line, instead.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you actually write?

SONTAG

I write with a felt-tip pen, or sometimes a pencil, on yellow or white legal pads, that fetish of American writers. I like the slowness of writing by hand. Then I type it up and scrawl all over that. And keep on retyping it, each time making corrections both by hand and directly on the typewriter, until I don't see how to make it any better. Up to five years ago, that was it. Since then there is a computer in my life. After the second or third draft it goes into the computer, so I don't retype the whole manuscript anymore, but continue to revise by hand on a succession of hard-copy drafts from the computer.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything that helps you get started writing?

SONTAG

Reading—which is rarely related to what I'm writing, or hoping to write. I read a lot of art history, architectural history, musicology, academic books on many subjects. And poetry. Getting started is partly stalling, stalling by way of reading and of listening to music, which energizes me and also makes me restless. Feeling guilty about *not* writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write every day?

SONTAG

No. I write in spurts. I write when I have to because the pressure builds up and I feel enough confidence that something has matured in my head and I can write it down. But once something is really under way, I don't want to do anything else. I don't go out, much of the time I forget to eat, I sleep very little. It's a very undisciplined way of working and makes me not very prolific. But I'm too interested in many other things.

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INTERVIEWER

Yeats said famously that one must choose between the life and the work. Do you think that is true?

SONTAG

As you know, he actually said that one must choose between perfection of the life and perfection of the work. Well, writing *is* a life—a very peculiar one. Of course, if by life you mean life with other people, Yeats's dictum is true. Writing requires huge amounts of solitude. What I've done to soften the harshness of that choice is that I don't write all the time. I like to go out—which includes traveling; I can't write when I travel. I like to talk. I like to listen. I like to look and to watch. Maybe I have an Attention Surplus Disorder. The easiest thing in the world for me is to pay attention.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise as you go along or do you wait until you have an entire draft and then revise the whole thing?

SONTAG

I revise as I go along. And that's quite a pleasurable task. I don't get impatient and I'm willing to go over and over something until it works. It's beginnings that are hard. I always begin with a great sense of dread and trepidation. Nietzsche says that the decision to start writing is like leaping into a cold lake. Only when I'm about a third of the way can I tell if it's good enough. Then I have my cards, and I can play my hand.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a difference between writing fiction and writing essays?

SONTAG

Writing essays has always been laborious. They go through many drafts, and the end result may bear little relation to the

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first draft: often I completely change my mind in the course of writing an essay. Fiction comes much easier, in the sense that the first draft contains the essentials—tone, lexicon, velocity, passions—of what I eventually end up with.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret anything you've written?

SONTAG

Nothing in its entirety except two theater chronicles I did in the mid-1960s for *Partisan Review*, and unfortunately included in the first collection of essays, *Against Interpretation*—I'm not suited for that kind of pugnacious, impressionistic task. Obviously, I don't agree with everything in the early essays. I've changed, and I know more. And the cultural context which inspired them has altogether changed. But there would be no point in modifying them now. I think I would like to take a blue pencil to the first two novels, though.

INTERVIEWER

The Benefactor, which you wrote in your late twenties, is narrated in the voice of a Frenchman in his sixties. Did you find it easy to impersonate someone so different from yourself?

SONTAG

Easier than writing about myself. But writing is impersonation. Even when I write about events in my own life, as I did in "Pilgrimage" and "Project for a Trip to China," it's not really me. But I admit that, with *The Benefactor*, the difference was as broad as I could make it. I wasn't celibate, I wasn't a recluse, I wasn't a man, I wasn't elderly, I wasn't French.

INTERVIEWER

But the novel seems very influenced by French literature.

SONTAG

Is it? It seems many people think that it was influenced by the *nouveau roman*. But I don't agree. There were ironic

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allusions to two French books, hardly contemporary ones: Descartes' *Meditations* and Voltaire's *Candide*. But those weren't influences. If there was an influence on *The Benefactor*, though one I wasn't at all conscious of at the time, it was Kenneth Burke's *Towards a Better Life*. I reread Burke's novel recently, after many decades (I may never have reread it since he gave me a copy when I was sixteen), and discovered in its programmatic preface what seems like a model for *The Benefactor*. The novel as sequence of arias and fictive moralizing. The coquetry of a protagonist—Burke dared to call his the novel's hero—so ingeniously self-absorbed that no reader could be tempted to identify with him.

INTERVIEWER

Your second novel, *Death Kit*, is quite different from *The Benefactor*.

SONTAG

Death Kit invites identification with its miserable protagonist. I was in the lamenting mood—it's written in the shadow of the Vietnam War. It's a book of grief, veils and all.

INTERVIEWER

Hardly a new emotion in your work. Wasn't your first published story entitled "Man with a Pain?"

SONTAG

Juvenilia. You won't find it in *I, etcetera*.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write those theater chronicles for *Partisan Review*?

SONTAG

Well you have to understand that the literary world then was defined by so-called small magazines—hard to imagine because it's so different now. My sense of literary vocation had

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been shaped by reading literary magazines—*Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Partisan Review*—at the end of the 1940s, while still in high school in Southern California. By the time I came to New York in 1960, those magazines still existed. But it was already the end of an era. Of course, I couldn't have known that. My highest ambition had been and still was to publish in one of these magazines, where five thousand people would read me. That seemed to me very heaven.

Soon after I moved to New York, I saw William Phillips at a party and got up my nerve to go over and ask him, "How does one get to write for *Partisan Review?*" He answered, "You come down to the magazine and I give you a book to review on spec." I was there the next day. And he gave me a novel. Not one I was interested in, but I wrote something decent, and the review was printed. And so the door was opened. But then there was some inappropriate fantasy, which I tried to squelch, that I was going to be "the new Mary McCarthy"—as Phillips made plain to me by asking me to do a theater chronicle. "You know, Mary used to do it," he said. I told him I didn't want to write theater reviews. He insisted. And so, much against my better judgment (I certainly had no desire to be the new Mary McCarthy, a writer who'd never mattered to me), I did turn out two of them. I reviewed plays by Arthur Miller and James Baldwin and Edward Albee and said they were bad and tried to be witty and hated myself for doing it. After the second round I told Phillips I couldn't go on.

INTERVIEWER

But you did go on and write those famous essays, some of which were published in *Partisan Review*.

SONTAG

Yes, but those subjects were all of my own choosing. I've hardly ever written anything on commission. I am not at all interested in writing about work I don't admire. And even among what I've admired, by and large I've written only about

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things I felt were neglected or relatively unknown. I am not a critic, which is something else than an essayist; I thought of my essays as cultural work. They were written out of a sense of what *needed* to be written.

I was assuming that a principal task of art was to strengthen the adversarial consciousness. And that led me to reach for relatively eccentric work. I took for granted that the liberal consensus about culture—I was and am a great admirer of Lionel Trilling—would stay in place, that the traditional canon of great books could not be threatened by work that was more transgressive or playful. But taste has become so debauched in the thirty years I've been writing that now simply to defend the idea of seriousness has become an adversarial act. Just to be serious or to care about things in an ardent, disinterested way is becoming incomprehensible to most people. Perhaps only those who were born in the 1930s—and maybe a few stragglers—are going to understand what it means to talk about art as opposed to art projects. Or artists as opposed to celebrities. As you see, I'm chock-full of indignation about the barbarism and relentless vacuity of this culture. How tedious always to be indignant.

INTERVIEWER

Is it old-fashioned to think that the purpose of literature is to educate us about life?

SONTAG

Well, it does educate us about life. I wouldn't be the person I am, I wouldn't understand what I understand, were it not for certain books. I'm thinking of the great question of nineteenth-century Russian literature: how should one live? A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibility, of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It's a creator of inwardness.

INTERVIEWER

Do writing an essay and writing a piece of fiction come from different parts of yourself?

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SONTAG

Yes. The essay is a constrained form. Fiction is freedom. Freedom to tell stories and freedom to be discursive, too. But essayistic discursiveness, in the context of fiction, has an entirely different meaning. It is always voiced.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if you have pretty much stopped writing essays.

SONTAG

I have. And most of the essays I've succumbed to writing in the past fifteen years are requiems or tributes. The essays on Canetti, Barthes and Benjamin are about elements in their work and sensibility that I feel close to: Canetti's cult of admiration and hatred of cruelty, Barthes's version of the aesthete's sensibility, Benjamin's poetics of melancholy. I was very aware that there's much to be said about them which I didn't say.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, I can see that those essays are disguised self-portraits. But weren't you doing much the same thing in early essays, including some of those in *Against Interpretation*?

SONTAG

I suppose it can't be helped that it all hangs together. Still, something else was going on in the essays that went into the last collection, *Under the Sign of Saturn*. I was having a kind of slow-motion, asymptomatic nervous breakdown writing essays. I was so full of feeling and ideas and fantasies that I was still trying to cram into the essay mode. In other words, I'd come to the end of what the essay form could do for me. Maybe the essays on Benjamin, Canetti and Barthes were self-portraits, but they were also really fictions. My volcano lover, the Cavaliere, is the fully realized fictional form of what I'd been trying to say, in an impacted way, in the essay-portraits of Canetti and Benjamin.

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INTERVIEWER

Writing fiction, is your experience one of inventing or figuring out a plot?

SONTAG

Oddly enough, the plot is what seems to come all of a piece—like a gift. It's very mysterious. Something I hear or see or read conjures up a whole story in all its concreteness: scenes, characters, landscapes, catastrophes. With *Death Kit*, it was hearing someone utter the childhood nickname of a mutual friend named Richard—just the hearing of the name: Diddy. With *The Volcano Lover*, it was browsing in a print shop near the British Museum and coming across some images of volcanic landscapes that turned out to be from Sir William Hamilton's *Campi Phlegraei*. For the new novel, it was reading something in Kafka's diaries, a favorite book, so I must have already read this paragraph, which may be an account of a dream, more than once. Reading it this time the story of a whole novel, like a movie I'd seen, leaped into my head.

INTERVIEWER

The whole story?

SONTAG

Yes, the whole story. The plot. But what the story can carry or accumulate—*that* I discover in the writing. If *The Volcano Lover* starts in a flea market and ends with Eleonora's beyond-the-grave monologue, it isn't as if I knew before I started writing all the implications of that journey, which goes from an ironic, down-market vignette of a collector on the prowl to Eleonora's moral wide-shot view of the whole story that the reader has experienced. Ending with Eleonora, and her denunciation of the protagonists, is as far as you can get from the point of view with which the novel starts.

INTERVIEWER

At the beginning of your legendary essay "Notes on Camp," which appeared in 1964, you wrote that your attitude was

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one of "deep sympathy modified by revulsion." This seems a typical attitude of yours: both yes and no to camp. Both yes and no to photography. Both yes and no to narrative . . .

SONTAG

It isn't that I like it and I don't like it: that's too simple. Or, if you will, it isn't "both yes and no." It's "this but also that." I'd love to settle in on a strong feeling or reaction. But, having seen whatever I see, my mind keeps on going and I see something else. It's that I quickly see the limitations of whatever I say or whatever judgment I make about anything. There's a wonderful remark of Henry James: "Nothing is my last word on anything." There's always more to be said, more to be felt.

INTERVIEWER

I think most people might imagine that you bring some theoretical agenda to fiction—if not as a writer of novels, at least as a reader of them.

SONTAG

But I don't. I need to care about and be touched by what I read. I can't care about a book that has nothing to contribute to the wisdom project. And I'm a sucker for a fancy prose style. To put it less giddily, my model for prose is poet's prose: many of the writers I most admire were poets when young or could have been poets. Nothing theoretical in all that. In fact, my taste is irrepressibly catholic. I shouldn't care to be prevented from doting on Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* and Didion's *Democracy*, Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk* and Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*.

INTERVIEWER

You're mentioning a number of contemporaries you admire. Would you also say you've been influenced by them?

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SONTAG

Whenever I avow to being influenced, I'm never sure I'm telling the truth. But here goes. I think I learned a lot about punctuation and speed from Donald Barthelme, about adjectives and sentence rhythms from Elizabeth Hardwick. I don't know if I learned from Nabokov and Thomas Bernhard, but their incomparable books help me keep my standards for myself as severe as they ought to be. And Godard—Godard has been a major nourishment to my sensibility and therefore, inevitably, to my writing. And I've certainly learned something as a writer from the way Schnabel plays Beethoven, Glenn Gould plays Bach, and Mitsuko Uchida plays Mozart.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read the reviews of your work?

SONTAG

No. Not even those I'm told are entirely favorable. All reviews upset me. But friends give me a certain thumbs-up, thumbs-down sense of what they are.

INTERVIEWER

After *Death Kit* you didn't write much for a few years.

SONTAG

I'd been very active in the anti-war movement since 1964, when it couldn't yet be called a movement. And that took up more and more time. I got depressed. I waited. I read. I lived in Europe. I fell in love. My admirations evolved. I made some movies. I had a crisis of confidence of how to write because I've always thought that a book should be something necessary, and that each book by me should be better than the one before. Punishing standards, but I'm quite loyal to them.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write *On Photography*?

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SONTAG

I was having lunch with Barbara Epstein of *The New York Review of Books* in early 1972 and going on about the Diane Arbus show at the Museum of Modern Art, which I'd just seen, and she said, "Why don't you write a piece about the show?" I thought that maybe I could. And then when I began writing it I thought that it should start with a few paragraphs about photography in general and then move to Arbus. And soon there was a lot more than a few paragraphs, and I couldn't extricate myself. The essays multiplied—I felt often like the hapless sorcerer's apprentice—and they got harder and harder to write, I mean, to get right. But I'm stubborn—I was on the third essay before I managed to place some paragraphs about Arbus and the show—and, feeling I'd committed myself, wouldn't give up. It took five years to write the six essays that make up *On Photography*.

INTERVIEWER

But you told me that you wrote your next book, *Illness as Metaphor*, very fast.

SONTAG

Well, it's shorter. One long essay, the non-fiction equivalent of a novella. And being ill—while writing it I was a cancer patient with a gloomy prognosis—was certainly very focusing. It gave me energy to think I was writing a book that would be helpful to other cancer patients and those close to them.

INTERVIEWER

All along you'd been writing stories . . .

SONTAG

Revving up for a novel.

INTERVIEWER

Soon after finishing *The Volcano Lover* you started another novel. Does that mean that you're more drawn to longer, rather than shorter, forms of fiction?

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SONTAG

Yes. There are a few of my stories which I like a lot—from *I, etcetera*, "Debriefing" and "Unguided Tour," and "The Way We Live Now," which I wrote in 1987. But I feel more drawn to polyphonic narratives, which need to be long—or longish.

INTERVIEWER

How much time did it take you to write *The Volcano Lover*?

SONTAG

From the first sentence of the first draft to the galleys, two and a half years. For me that's fast.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you?

SONTAG

I started *The Volcano Lover* in September 1989 in Berlin, where I had gone to hang out thinking that I was going to a place that was both very isolated and the Berkeley of Central Europe. Although only two months after I arrived Berlin had started to become a very different place, it still retained its main advantages for me: I wasn't in my apartment in New York, with all my books, and I wasn't in the place that I was writing about either. That sort of double distancing works very well for me.

About half of *The Volcano Lover* was written between late 1989 and the end of 1990 in Berlin. The second half was written in my apartment in New York, except for two chapters that I wrote in a hotel room in Milan (a two-week escapade) and another chapter which I wrote in the Mayflower Hotel in New York. That was the Cavaliere's deathbed interior monologue, which I thought I had to write in one go, in complete isolation, and knew—I don't know how I knew—that I could do in three days. So I left my apartment and checked into the hotel with my typewriter and legal-sized pads and felt-tip pens, and ordered up BLTs until I was done.

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INTERVIEWER

Did you write the novel in sequence?

SONTAG

Yes. I write chapter by chapter and I don't go on to the next chapter until the one I'm working on is in final form. That was frustrating at first because from the beginning I knew much of what I wanted the characters to say in the final monologues, but I feared that if I wrote them early on I wouldn't be able to go back to the middle. I was also afraid that maybe by the time I got to it I would have forgotten some of the ideas or no longer be connected to those feelings. The first chapter, which is about fourteen typewritten pages, took me four months to write. The last five chapters, some one hundred typewritten pages, took me two weeks.

INTERVIEWER

How much of the book did you have in mind before you started?

SONTAG

I had the title; I can't write something unless I already know its title. I had the dedication; I knew I would dedicate it to my son. I had the *Così fan tutte* epigraph. And of course I had the story in some sense, and the span of the book. And what was most helpful, I had a very strong idea of a structure. I took it from a piece of music, Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments*—a work I know very well, since it's the music of one of Balanchine's most sublime ballets, which I've seen countless times. The Hindemith starts with a triple prologue, three very short pieces. Then come four movements: melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, choleric. In that order. I knew I was going to have a triple prologue and then four sections or parts corresponding to the four temperaments—though I saw no reason to belabor the idea by actually labeling Parts I to IV "melancholic," "sanguinic," etc. I knew all of that, plus the novel's last sentence: "Damn them all." Of course, I didn't know who

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was going to utter it. In a sense, the whole work of writing the novel consisted of making something that would justify that sentence.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds like a lot to know before beginning.

SONTAG

Yes, but for all that I knew about it, I still didn't understand all that it could be. I started off thinking that *The Volcano Lover* was the story of the volcano lover, Sir William Hamilton, the man I call the Cavaliere; that the book would stay centered on him. And I was going to develop the character of the self-effacing first Lady Hamilton, Catherine, at the expense of the story of his second wife, which everyone knows. I knew her story and the relation with Nelson had to figure in the novel, but I intended to keep it in the background. The triple prologue and Part I, with its many variations on the theme of melancholy (or depression, as we call it)—the melancholy of the collector, the ecstatic sublimation of that melancholy—all that went as planned. Part I never leaves the Cavaliere. But then, when I started my Part II—which was to have variations on the theme of blood, from the sanguinic Emma, this person bursting with energy and vitality, to the literal blood of the Neapolitan revolution—Emma kidnapped the book. And that permitted the novel to open out (the chapters got longer and longer) into a furor of storytelling and of reflections about justice, war and cruelty. That was the end of the main narrative, told in the third person. The rest of the novel was to be in the first person. A very short Part III: the Cavaliere—delirious, "phlegmatic"—enacts, in words, his dying. That went exactly as I'd imagined it, but then I was back in the Cavaliere-centered world of Part I. There were more surprises for me when I came to write the monologues of Part IV, "choleric": women, angry women, speaking from beyond the grave.

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INTERVIEWER

Why beyond the grave?

SONTAG

A supplementary fiction, making it more plausible that they are speaking with such insistent, heartfelt, heartbreaking truthfulness. My equivalent of the unmediated, acutely rueful directness of an operatic aria. And how could I resist the challenge of ending each monologue with the character describing her own death?

INTERVIEWER

Were they always going to be all women?

SONTAG

Yes, definitely. I always knew the book would end with women's voices, the voices of some of the women characters in the book, who would finally have their say.

INTERVIEWER

And give the woman's point of view.

SONTAG

Well, you're assuming that there is a woman's, or female, point of view. I don't. Your question reminds me that, whatever their numbers, women are always regarded, are culturally constructed, as a minority. It's to minorities that we impute having a unitary point of view. Lord what do women want? etc. Had I ended the novel with the voices of four men, no one would suppose I was giving the male point of view; the differences among the four voices would be too striking. These women are as different from each other as any of four men characters in the novel I might have chosen. Each retells the story (or part of it) already known to the reader from her own point of view. Each has a truth to tell.

INTERVIEWER

Do they have anything in common?

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SONTAG

Of course. They all know, in different ways, that the world is run by men. So, with respect to the great public events that have touched their lives, they have the insight of the disenfranchised to contribute. But they don't speak only about public events.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know who the women would be?

SONTAG

I knew pretty soon that the first three beyond-the-grave monologues would be by Catherine, Emma's mother and Emma. But I was already in the middle of writing Part II, Chapter 6 and boning up on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, before I found the speaker of the fourth and last monologue: Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, who makes a brief appearance toward the end of that chapter, the narrative climax of the novel. And, finding her, I finally understood the unwrapped gift of that last line, which I'd heard in my head before I'd even started writing—that hers would be the voice that had the right to utter it. The events, public and private, of her life, as well as her atrocious death, follow the historical record, but her principles—her ethical ardor—are the novelist's invention. While I'd felt sympathy for the characters in *The Benefactor* and *Death Kit*, what I feel for the characters in *The Volcano Lover* is love (I had to borrow a stage villain, Scarpia, to have one character in *The Volcano Lover* I didn't love). But I can live with their becoming small at the end. I mean, it *is* the end of the novel. I was thinking in cinematic terms as I did throughout Part II, Chapter 6. Remember how so many French films of the early 1960s ended with the camera in long shot starting to pull back, and the character moving further and further into the rear of the pictured space, becoming smaller and smaller as the credits start to roll. Seen in the ethical wide shot that Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel provides, Nelson and the Cavaliere and Emma should be judged as

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harshly as she judges them. Although they do end badly in one way or another, they are extremely privileged, they're still winners—except for poor Emma, and even she has quite a ride for a while. The last word should be given to someone who speaks for victims.

INTERVIEWER

There are so many voices—stories and sub-stories.

SONTAG

Until the late 1980s most of what I did in fiction was going on inside a single consciousness, whether it was actually in the first person like *The Benefactor* or nominally in the third person like *Death Kit*. Until *The Volcano Lover*, I wasn't able to give myself permission to tell a story, a real story, as opposed to the adventures of somebody's consciousness. The key was this structure that I borrowed from the Hindemith composition. I'd had the idea for a long time that my third novel was going to have the title *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. But I was resisting it—I don't mean fiction, but *that* novel, whose story hadn't yet been given to me. But it's obvious to me now that I didn't really want to write it. I mean a book written under the aegis of that title, which is just another way of saying "under the sign of Saturn." Most of my work had projected only one of the old temperaments: melancholy. I didn't want to write just about melancholy. The musical structure, with its arbitrary order, freed me. Now I could do all four.

With *The Volcano Lover* the door opened and I have a wider entry. That's the great struggle, for more access and more expressiveness, isn't it? You don't—I'm adapting a phrase of Philip Larkin—write the novels you really want to write. But I think I'm coming closer.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if some of your essayistic impulses are also part of the novel's form.

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SONTAG

I suppose it's true that if you strung together all the passages about collecting in *The Volcano Lover* you'd have a discontinuous, aphoristic essay that might well stand on its own. Still, the degree of essayistic speculation in *The Volcano Lover* seems restrained if compared with a central tradition of the European novel. Think of Balzac and Tolstoy and Proust, who go on for pages and pages that could really be excerpted as essays. Or *The Magic Mountain*, perhaps the thinkiest great novel of all. But speculation, rumination, direct address to the reader are entirely indigenous to the novel form. The novel is a big boat. It's not so much that I was able to salvage the banished essayist in myself. It's that the essayist in me was only part of the novelist I've finally given myself permission to be.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have to do a lot of research?

SONTAG

You mean reading? Yes, some. The me who is a self-defrocked academic found that part of writing a novel set in the past very pleasurable.

INTERVIEWER

Why set a novel in the past?

SONTAG

To escape the inhibitions connected with my sense of the contemporary, my sense of how degraded and debased the way we live and feel and think is now. The past is bigger than the present. Of course, the present is always there, too. The narrating voice of *The Volcano Lover* is very much of the late twentieth century, driven by late twentieth-century concerns. It was never my idea to write a "you are there" historical novel, even while it was a matter of honor to make the historical substance of the novel as dense and accurate as I could. It felt even more spacious that way. But having decided to give myself

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one more romp in the past—with *In America*, the novel I'm writing now—I'm not sure it will work out the same way this time.

INTERVIEWER

When is it set?

SONTAG

From the mid-1870s almost to the end of the nineteenth century. And, like *The Volcano Lover*, it's based on a real story, that of a celebrated Polish actress and her entourage who left Poland and went to Southern California to create a utopian community. The attitudes of my principal characters are wonderfully exotic to me—Victorian, if you will. But the America they arrive in is not so exotic, though I'd thought that to set a book in late nineteenth-century America would feel almost as remote as late eighteenth-century Naples and London. It's not. There is an astonishing continuity of cultural attitudes in our country. I never cease to be surprised that the America Tocqueville observed in the early 1830s is, in most respects, recognizably the America of the end of the twentieth century—even though the demographic and ethnographic composition of the country has totally changed. It's as if you had changed both the blade and handle of a knife and it is still the same knife.

INTERVIEWER

Your play, *Alice in Bed*, is also about a late nineteenth-century sensibility.

SONTAG

Yes—Alice James plus the nineteenth century's most famous Alice, Lewis Carroll's. I was directing a production of Pirandello's *As You Desire Me* in Italy, and one day Adriana Asti, who played the lead, said to me—dare I say it?—playfully: "Please write a play for me. And remember, I have to be on stage all the time." And then Alice James, thwarted

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writer and professional invalid, fell into my head, and I made up the play on the spot and told it to Adriana. But I didn't write it for another ten years.

INTERVIEWER

Are you going to write more plays? You've always been very involved with theater.

SONTAG

Yes. I hear voices. That's why I like to write plays. And I've lived in the world of theater artists for much of my life. When I was very young, acting was the only way I knew how to insert myself into what happens on a stage: starting at ten, I was taken on for some kiddie roles in Broadway plays put on by a community theater (this was in Tucson); I was active in student theater—Sophocles, Shakespeare—at the University of Chicago; and in my early twenties did a bit of summer stock. Then I stopped. I'd much rather direct plays (though not my own). And make films (I hope to make better ones than the four I wrote and directed in Sweden, Israel and Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s). And direct operas, which I haven't done yet. I'm very drawn to opera—the art form that most regularly and predictibly produces ecstasy (at least in this opera lover). Opera is one of the inspirations of *The Volcano Lover*: stories from operas and operatic emotions.

INTERVIEWER

Does literature produce ecstasy?

SONTAG

Sure, but less reliably than music and dance: literature has more on its mind. One must be strict with books. I want to read only what I'll want to reread—the definition of a book worth reading once.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever go back and reread your work?

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SONTAG

Except to check translations, no. Definitely no. I'm not curious. I'm not attached to the work I've already done. Also, perhaps I don't want to see how it's all the same. Maybe I'm always reluctant to reread anything I wrote more than ten years ago because it would destroy my illusion of endless new beginnings. That's the most American part of me: I feel that it's always a new start.

INTERVIEWER

But your work is so diverse.

SONTAG

Well it's supposed to be diverse, though of course there is a unity of temperament, of preoccupation—certain predicaments, certain emotions that recur: ardor and melancholy. And an obsessive concern with human cruelty, whether cruelty in personal relations or the cruelty of war.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your best work is still to come?

SONTAG

I hope so. Or . . . yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think much about the audience for your books?

SONTAG

Don't dare. Don't want to. But, anyway, I don't write because there's an audience. I write because there is literature.

—**Edward Hirsch**

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Three Poems by Charles Simic

Shadow Publishing Company

This couple strolling arm in arm
Must be figments of someone's revery.
They stop often to linger over a kiss,
But when people look their way,
It's as if they do not see them.

It's the heat, the blue dusk,
The air of enchantment
On the street of overgrown lilacs
And screened porches
Where a door is already open for them.

An old woman waits in the dim entrance
With a pitcher of cold lemonade
And two tall glasses on a tray.
She wants them to rest awhile
In her own wedding bed and they obey.

Her late husband was an eye doctor.
His surgical instruments lie in glass cage
Gleaming like cold moonlight
In dark cuffs, he made the blind see
By removing their bandages.

In a room shaded against the heat,
With a few slender lines of light
On the high ceiling,
And that strange sense of taking on the life
Of someone unknown just then,

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Lying there, closing one's eyes in revery,
A figment among figments
Living one of their blessed moments
Without recognizing the century . . .
Only the scent of the lilacs is real.

The World's Greatest Ventriloquist

Neon at sundown, early shadows
Going to meet the one and true darkness.
Avenue where I was a child in a shoe box,
A soap bubble above the fire escapes,
A few endazzled windows at the horizon,
The rest shaded, curtained and vacant.

The bearded old man on the corner,
The one drinking out of a brown paper bag,
The one who declares himself
The world's greatest ventriloquist,
We are all his dummies, he says
When he chooses to say anything:

Young lovers carrying tall cages
With frightened song birds . . .
Some hoodlum prince waving
A hundred dollar bill out of a passing car . . .
The blind doomsayer lifting his board
For all to read . . .

So, I'm the cat's paw, I said,
And went off shadowboxing
With my reflection
In a row of store windows
That already had that seen-a-ghost look.

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Against Winter

The truth is dark under your eyelids.
What are you going to do about it?
The birds are silent; there's no one to ask.
All day long you'll squint at the gray sky.
When the wind blows you'll shiver like straw.

A meek little lamb you grew your wool
Till they came after you with huge shears.
Flies hovered over your open mouth,
Then they, too, flew off like the leaves,
The bare branches reached after them in vain.

Winter coming. Like the last heroic soldier
Of a defeated army, you'll stay at your post,
Head bared to the first snowflake.
Till a neighbor comes to yell at you,
You're crazier than the weather, Charlie.

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Two Poems by Nance Van Winckel

Unfinished Canvas

(Flemish Peasant Family)

No wonder the Antwerp teashops
refuse him—except with a heel of bread
through the back door. Held out
to the baker, his palms, still sticky with paint,
hardly appear the hands of a man.

The four lives he wanted to lift
only obliquely to his canvas
have waylaid his backward glance.
An elbow rip for the boy's shirtsleeve
takes all day. The swift forwardness slows.

He cannot make the man in the cap appear
his father exactly, though the woman's
hard glare has dropped from above
the very breast he suckled. Such looks
take their long passages through him.

Once he liked to sip strong wine. Now nothing
is too strong going through but the light.
July's sundown so late it shortens a night's
dreaming: chins & ankles, tatters for a man's
cap brim, grime for a woman's petticoat hem.

Eating bread, standing up in the cobblestone
alley, he thinks Shoes, yes for the boy,
but not for the daughter. From her eyes'
other side, get the shine turned up:
the blue rosaries of misgiving.

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The temptation to make them all meek,
swarms of Mary's. Once this bread went
into its red cave, and came out the color of noon.
So a child's expression veers off. Toward sweet
smells: steam through the vent grates.

Here, let this pale doughy heel be finished,
erased by the body. Rarely saving the strength
to be gentle. Flecks of pity, rubbed raw, smear
into bewildered Joseph's: hunched and addled,
ripping a dove's breast loose from its back.

Sometimes to look as the worm looks—
the no one's view of everyone. Or to see
as the startled sparrow—from high and fleeing
on the wing. A dab at the mother's eye, as if she's
through sobbing for her prodigals, her runaways.

A single drop of black goo opens, expands
her gaze. Soon the falls of her secret blood
begin to blast their spray. Then yes, to stand
in that spray—stroked by it and stroking,
soaked to the bone and singing.

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Every Good Thing

(Stela of Cheywath)

2250 B.C.

Famished under the stone. The lips, sealed
tight, still taste, but lock down a hunger.

His cleaned-out body—and laid before it
a thousand of bread, beer, oxen, fowl,
and every good thing. His gratitude
is the breeze over the stone.

Hieroglyphs say who he was
with extinct birds, half-risen suns.

Now, and with only a few brown figs left
in their sack, robbers poke a hole in the crypt.
Ravished by heat, they've journeyed far.
Wearing the wrong shoes, dripping sand.

The wealth of their new lives is heaped
at this table of the dead. But where to sit?

They stand. The last fig pits fall
among the gold and the bones.
And in the way a thief cloaks his face,
the final breeze cowers & backs off.

The courtier's mourners, hot from baking
and slaughtering and crying, filed by.

It was all right in that millennia
to touch him, envy his calm and his cool,
and to pat his belly which was full already
from so much feasting on the other side.

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Eight Poems by Patrick Martin

False Alarm

You can take my hand
anywhere. Tonight,
let it be the story of smoke

coming out of trash cans,
or orange hearsay and
incandescence, like children

making a simple plot
of escape and excitation.
We can wear masks

if we want to;
we can wear masks
if we don't want to.

But let's not ask
the burning question:
What will we do

after the bright cringe
of dye, when there is no fire
and everything is turned

off, when we see below the lever,
the red, almost
understated word:

emergency?

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Divorce

Now only one thing is bright enough
to cast a shadow—Venus.

Its steady light gives the last contrast
before perfect dark.

Everything is higher, as when
the tides wear away streets

and the curbs fall
away, hydrants are ten

feet high; the pipes and valves
they plug into are all artifice.

It is a place best left.
It is weightless, the inability

to keep down food, stomach
lining sloughed off—I tell this

story. I can't tell this
story. I tell this story

again. The light goes out of the sky
completely. Venus, too, has set. Jupiter

is in the sky, its collection of
satellites like the functional family

next door. The universe sprawls,
unknown creatures, unwritten rules—

a cold, inviting city.

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The Climber

I would like to tell you
that I went easily
or that, hand over hand,
the way was steep and

Mysterious, but I stopped
often, cursed my stylized
tennis shoes, the contents
of my bag—too much food, no

Water. I was passed
by the wind and other hikers;
it was simple untreacherous
work which I did like an

Ant. I cannot tell you
how long this has been going
on; something splits me—it's
the air not working—no

Voice; it's my legs, a ringing
in the bones, my will
diminishes, like decomposing
granite, the map is my only

Power. At the summit,
the water in my voice rises in me
like an ant, like a power in this
mysterious mountain.

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The Basement

They always said it was horrible, the way the man
who looked like my father died. Sometimes, it was what appeared
on the death certificate—heart attack. Once, a car jack

failed, pinning him under a 1939 DeSoto. When one of these stories
was told, it would stop the argument before dinner. In that quiet,
I would go into a basement filled with guns and scrap lumber.

Surrounded by the cement which held up our house,
I would try out his old tools, to hammer things together,
to understand the grip of those enormous, wasted hands.

In Dog-Years

Humans live
long in proportion to
what they don't

do. Lusty types
weather fast, their
skin turns to

leather before
forty. Monks
count their years

in scores,
walking robed. In
heaven, you live

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forever. Comatose
humans are said to
hang on longest.

Ten years. Fifteen
years. Not long
in the grand

scheme, but an
eternity, considering
the debilitated

condition of crouching
near death. I
have lived my life

in dog-years, aging
seven times faster
than I need. *Look*,

they say,
he's twenty-three
but that's

one-hundred
and sixty-one
to you and me.

Sands

This is the 31st time I've been here,
he says, leaning on a walker.
Even though he's sitting next to me
when he says *here*, I don't know where
here is, but then he tells me

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in his whole life he's never lost
more than 100 dollars; the secret

is the wager goes in the left pocket
and the winnings go in the right. At Sands
everything is open all night.
You can get out of bed at two
in the morning, gamble and eat
doughnuts and I imagine, as he tells,
that he does just that, that the casino

is underwater, timeless in time,
the plush carpet like kelp. It is dark
and hot outside and the light of the slots
is the Only Light in the World. And when
he has no more to wager, he counts his
winnings, his lack of winnings, goes
to bed or the bus terminal. It's a quick, cautious

purchase. I want to scold him, ask him
if he's danced, if he's seen the remains
of St. Helens, wandered into the mountains
with no intention of returning,
but I haven't either.
He's pleasant, the way he says good-bye,
calling me "sir" when I'm half his age,

comfortable knowing we'll never meet again.
I watch him carry his body and his baggage
with small difficulty and excitement. The door
to the terminal opens. He's back:
exactly where he wants to be,
as I sit waiting for some other appointment
never knowing where desolation comes from.

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Roaches

Hail the greasy automatons, each circuit of hunger
traced on linoleum— toward dishwater and marinara
and back under the radiator. A commute from airless blind
walls to a sunfree circumambulation of the sink.

Nothing is left unsaid— nothing is said at all;
to know nothing is to make true ignorance impossible
because to be unable to acquire makes acquisition
meaningless.
But still, my mind turns back against my will to how

you can't quite kill them all off neatly because
my whole mind turns like ten thousand roaches
hundreds and hundreds of times every day and when I'm
finished
telling you this, as I am telling you this automatic tale,
nothing

will have been wasted because nothing is ever used.

The Nights on False Island

The cliffs on this heart-
land lake terrorize me.
Eroding and standing
defiant in full moon,

or no moon at all,
with their big lofty spines
to half-still water.
Their faces confront earth,

walk toward the plains,
but trip back onto shore,
like a bad machine
or a weaving toddler.

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I am not threatened,
nor is there any motion
about me; I take in
every rocky form

like an eager child
in a new lesson, eyes
open, alert—rubble
gathering at my knees.

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Three Poems from Venera *by Jay Rogoff*

The Queen

Smell the lilies and the columbine,
intoxicating rose, seductive lily-
of-the-valley, come smell! Can't they die?
Must they suffer the hothouse of her crown,
the stars of her triumphant constellation,
these fresh-cut flowers trumpeting the sky,
woven into jewels, pearls, filigree,
the spoil of oysters and the sweat-stained mine?
Well, she's a queen, our lady must exploit
her subjects to be elegantly dressed—
fair bargain when adored. I swear by the First
Amendment to stand erect. The cheapest
whore is as worthy of rank worship. Yet
smell those flowers, the perfume at her throat!

The Bride

Chasing my darling through the snow-lit trees
to a room in a realm where rain always rained,
I knelt outside, spying love through the blind,
fingering the pane, the crack in the glass
splitting my view between dress and undress,
light breaking from skin emerging ungowned,
unblue, unvelveted, my sight unstained
save for that other between her and my eyes.
Imagine my shock, my severest charge
short-circuiting broad waking dreams of marriage
with wet lips full of syllables that spill

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like flung neon through rain calling *Motel*,
a sign, like light cast out of her forehead,
how willingly she could be spirited.

The Virgin

Her back turned on his primal nakedness,
her downcast eyes defy the gaze of the naked
woman, a fallen version of herself naked.
She reads aloud to gilt her loneliness,
rose rising in her face, the syllables
clothed in her clear soprano as the body
with muscle, bone, and sphincter clothes a void,
in garments rich and pure as nakedness.
The midnight velvet of her gown redeems
her own untouchable, her own un-
imaginable nakedness—bare arms,
breasts, belly, maidenhood in a golden grove.
Forever in her cloth of honor's weave
a gold horse kneels, bearing its golden horn.

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Three Poems by Kay Ryan

Crib

From the Greek for
woven or *plaited*,
which quickly translated
to *basket*. Whence the verb
crib, which meant *to filch*
under cover of wicker
anything—some liquor,
a cutlet.
For we want to make off
with things that are not
our own. There is a pleasure
theft brings, a vitality
to the home.
Cribbed objects or answers
keep their guilty shimmer
forever, have you noticed?
Yet religions downplay this.
Note, for instance, in our
annual rehearsals of innocence,
the substitution of *manger* for *crib*—
as if we ever deserved that baby,
or thought we did.

Bestiary

A bestiary catalogs
bests. The mediocres
both higher and lower

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are suppressed in favor
of the singularly savage
or clever, the spectacularly
pincered, the archest
of the arch deceivers
who press their advantage
without quarter even after
they've won as of course they would.
Best is not to be confused with *good*—
a different creature altogether,
and treated of in the goodiary—
a text alas lost now for centuries.

Poetry in Translation

It is
so snug—
the skin
of the living animal
stretched out
to a rug
shaped something
like the United States.
One meditates
upon a
Florida-like flap—
a forward leg
which ran
the Russian steppes
perhaps?

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Two Poems by James Laughlin

A Florilegium

The Purple Clematis

Each day the purple clematis climbs further up the wire beside
the kitchen door
Green fingers twine around the strands of wire
And soon there is another blossom with a yellow star at its
center
Whom are you chasing, I ask the flower
Are you racing the horses of the sun?
Do you imagine that Phaëthon, son of Helios, has time to
fall in love with you?
Surely you've heard that he is condemned to die every evening
How like a man, she answers, what do I care about the drivers
of chariots?
I'm only looking for a small crack in this wall
Where I may conceal myself from that ruffian, the north wind
Boreas
Who only too soon will be here with his cruel winter.

The Wild Geranium

How like a flower does Chloe gently bend her head
At the approach of wind or rain
Then comes the sun and quickly she's herself again
Not arrogant but confident of her beauty.

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:

Anthea

Anthea greenly creeps the ground
Her tiny flower hardly to be seen against the rocks
But country people know of her healing power
Zeus promised it for her in recompense
When he forced her mother, the sweet nymph Cleomine.

De Iuventute

When I was a young man
chasing girls I was so
hot to get into them I
never had time to learn
to savor the pleasures
of it. Fuss and rush
was all it was. And on
to the next.

Now that I'm old and
girls will have none
of me I must try to
imagine what it would
have been like with
each of them if I
had taken some pains
to learn to please them.

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Portfolio

Locomotives

Brian D. Cohen

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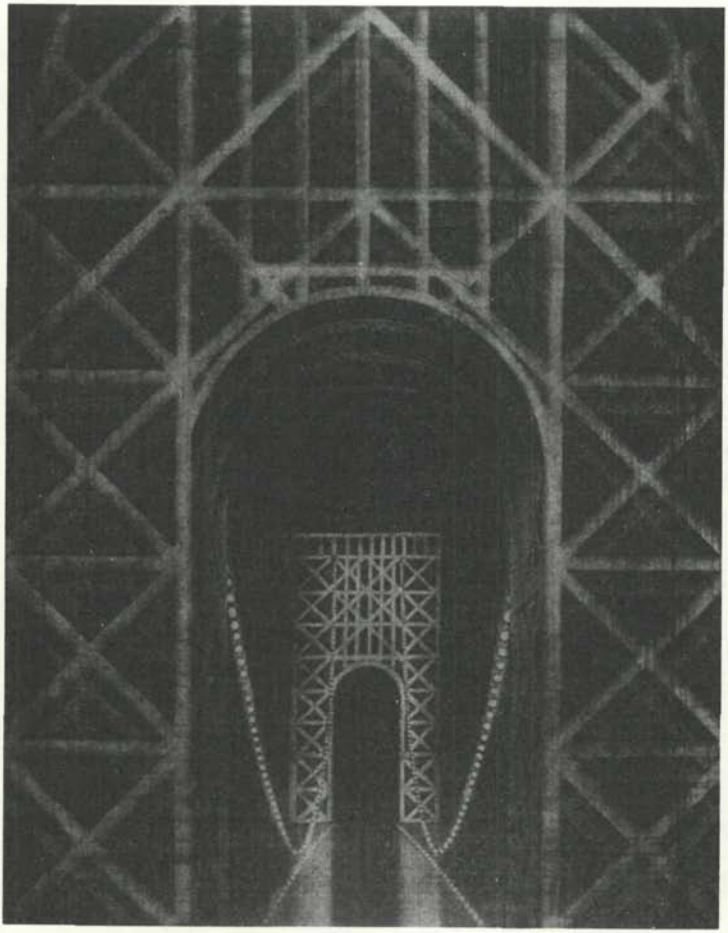

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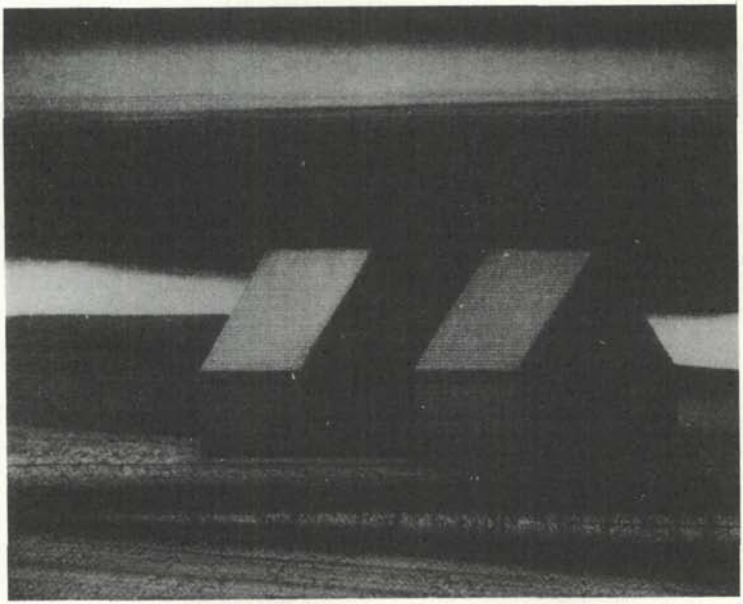

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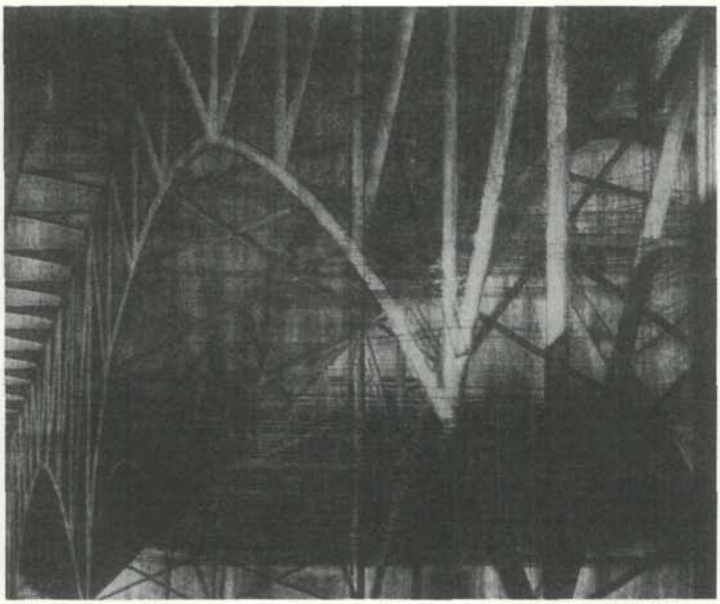

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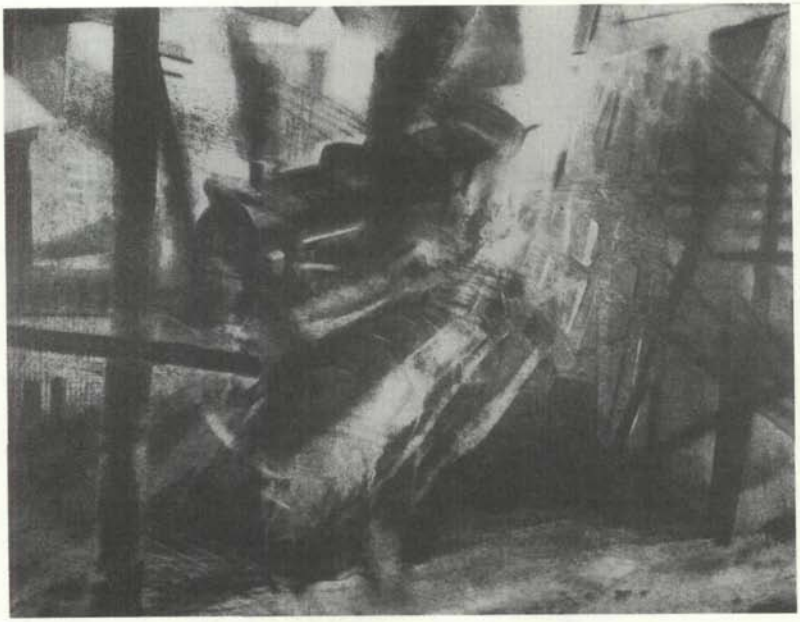

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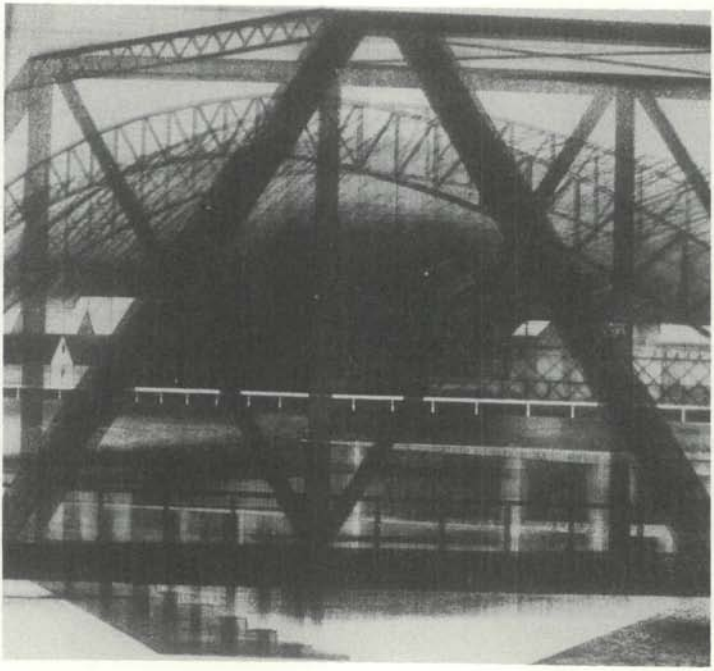

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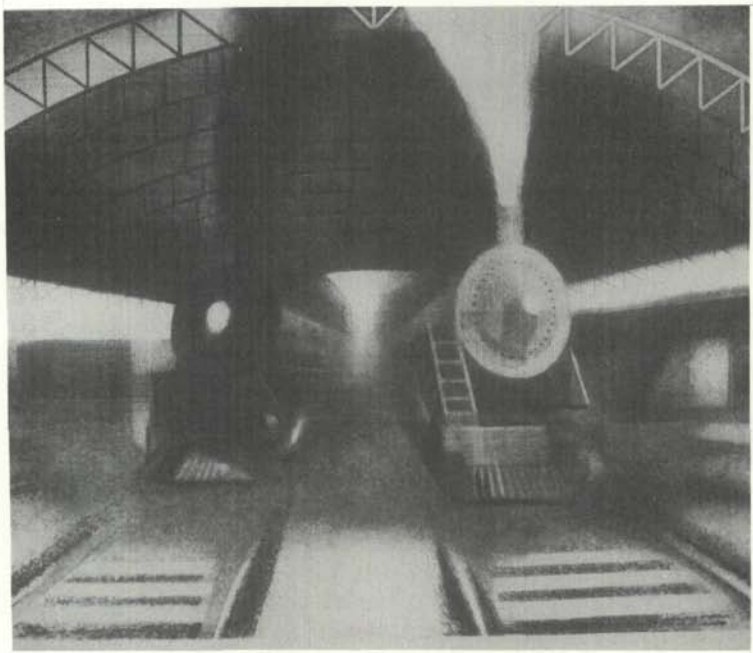

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from Anecdotage

Gregor von Rezzori

In June 1990 I found myself in Romania again: in Constanta. Another television assignment. A survey conducted by the French *Antenne Deux* gave me a chance to show off my knowledge of my native land. We went around asking women how they had gotten by in the years of the dictatorship. A lady formerly prominent in provincial society nostalgically described to us the glory of bygone days in a harbor town full of interesting consular officers of various nationalities (preferably Italian) and marvelously dashing naval officers. This splendor came to a sudden end followed by years of adversity during which (before her husband—an engineer who owed his unemployment to his bourgeois origins—died) she had been forced to sell all her "real" carpets. She had survived only thanks to her marriage "far beneath my station" to an electrician. When he died he left her a two-room apartment and a small pension. No heartrending tragedy this; her tale was more or less typical of the flat-footed spiritual lives of the bourgeoisie.

The next was a prototypical harem beauty: roundly full-fashioned from top to bottom with magnificent black hair luminous eyes cherry mouth and a faint shadow of mustache

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beneath a finely curved nose. Gay as a goldfinch she told of three simultaneous lovers who made her life endurable: a Party functionary to protect her; a cook at a state-run restaurant to give her food; a customs official who spoiled her with luxury products (perfumes silk stockings and American cigarettes). After the coup she'd declared the Party official superfluous and given him the boot. The two others were still current. She expected of the newly established democracy that in future she could limit herself to a single lover.

The third woman we interviewed was a young prostitute: dirty-blond pretty as a picture slender limbs fine features. She'd been plying her trade since the age of fourteen. Now she was twenty-three. It was impossible to understand how such a creature survived the patronage of dockworkers Russian Turkish and Bulgarian sailors East German vacationers from Mamaia.

For the defunct regime she had only a shrug—and the same for the current one. "Who's going to make trouble for a person in my profession? Customers come and go, including the worst ones. We are eternal." The circle is completed: Hamburg 1947. We were setting up a shoot in a hotel room in the heart of town. While technicians lit the scene I sat with her in the restaurant. The inevitable money changer swooped down. More obnoxious and repulsive than usual. She shooed him away with an indignant exclamation and a wave of her hand. As if this had been the signal everyone was waiting for a fellow in a circle of seedy-looking characters at the next table rose and came over to us. Before I could figure out what he was up to he seized my wineglass and splashed it into her face. "You dare to insult respectable people you filthy little whore . . . !" and so on with plenty of obscenities. I'm no longer in physical or mental shape to get involved in such brawls. Besides which I didn't know his relationship to her: he might have been a plainclothes man or her pimp . . . I pushed him aside took her by the hand and escorted her from the restaurant.

Upstairs in the hotel room and safe in the company of my strapping young film colleagues I wanted to comfort her. She

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was not at all mortified. She said it had been very wise of me not to have responded with physical aggression. "It could have turned out very badly." And as for herself . . . She began to recite a stanza of a Romanian poem. "That sounds familiar. What is it?" I asked. "You must know it." she said. "Baudelaire." Astonished I asked: "And you know it by heart?" Perfectly ingenuous she replied: "We had to learn it by heart. There are hardly any books. Before it's passed on to the next person we learn it by heart." "We? Who is we?" She replied offhandedly: "Young people like me."

Nothing was more natural than that the classic *post coitum* conversation with the "fallen woman" should ensue. (Literature had established the same intimacy between us as the consumed service would have done.) Didn't she have any other way to earn her living? "Nothing better than this," she said dispassionately. Didn't she have anyone to take care of her? A man who could protect her? No one she really liked? Loved?

Smiling patiently she waited for me to finish with my questions. When I got to the word *love* she said with an nonchalant shrug: "You know: I don't really believe in the true love that Mircea Eliade says shows up only once in a millennium. Would you give me a pack of American cigarettes?"

•

That B. is descended from an Armenian mother a French grandmother and an English great-grandmother shows in her face in the loveliest epoch-embezzlerish way. A creature from the Age of the Crusades as if she's just stepped down from atop an early Gothic church portal. The strong and the delicate solid and fragile sensual and chaste united in a single image—this is what makes her seem to belong in a niche beneath a pointed arch. The compactly modeled nose and amber eyes are Oriental; the clear broad forehead and faintly cruel mouth come from the Burgundy of the early Middle Ages; the chin chiseled of the finest steel displays an English determination. Italian—from her father—is the neck: her most beautiful feature. The grace with which it bears her well-shaped head takes

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its example from the best centuries of Italian art history. What else? Yes: her character too is a mix of strength and fragility grace and hardness Eastern wisdom and Occidentally idealistic self-deception. She blushes in anger when I say that young heroes are mythical figures only because they died before their balls shriveled up. When I claim that even art is a matter of hormones and the death of O.W.A.s probably nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence. But sometimes lucky, ostensible fulfillment thanks to a presumably well-timed interruption.

The race driver Jackie Stewart once made B. the present of an anecdote. Once during a race a gust of air blew into his face containing the essence of all the summers of his lifetime. The impression was so vivid that after the race he drove the same stretch again slowly to discover its source. At the point where he had been struck by that quintessence of summer air the guard wall of a curve was padded with straw. The scent of it had struck his senses with the highest possible intensity at two hundred miles per hour. How beautiful! How profound! I like discussing this incident with B. (She admired and loved Bruce. And Ugo was perhaps even closer to her.) I ask her: was it the infinitely intensified impatience of his desire to win that had sharpened Stewart's senses to the point of making it possible for the scent of straw to become the quintessence of a life's worth of summers? Or was it the resolute patience with which he retraced the racecourse step by step to which he owed the revelation that it had been nothing more than a bundle of straw? An old man's ruminations . . .

—translated from the German
by Susan Bernofsky with the author

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Dog Days

Judy Budnitz

The man in the dog suit whines outside the door.

"Again?" sighs my mother.

"Where's my gun?" says my dad.

"We'll take care of it this time," my older brothers say.

They go outside. We hear the shouts and the scuffle, and whimpers as he crawls away up the street.

My brothers come back in. "That takes care of *that*," they say, rubbing their hands together.

"Damn nutcase," my dad growls.

But the next day he is back. His dog suit is shabby. The zipper's gone; the front's all held together with safety pins. He looks like a mutt. His tongue is flat and pink like a slice of bologna. He pants at me.

"Mom," I call, "he's back."

My mother sighs, then comes to the door and looks at him. He cocks his head at her. "Oh, look at him, he looks hungry," my mother says. "He looks sad."

I say: "He smells."

"No collar," says my mother. "He must be a stray."

"Mother," I say. "He's a man in a dog suit."

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He sits up and begs.

My mother doesn't look at me. She reaches out and strokes the man's head. He blinks at her longingly. "Go get a plate," she tells me. "See what you can dig out of the garbage."

"Dad's going to be mad," I say.

"Just do it," she says.

So I do it, because I have no excuses, there's nothing left to do, no school, no nothing. No place to go. People don't leave their houses. They sit and peer out the windows and wait. Outside it's perfectly quiet, no crickets, no katydids.

I come back to the door and lay the plate on the stoop. My mother and I watch as he buries his face in the dirty scraps. He licks the plate clean and looks up at us.

"Good dog," my mother says.

"He's a *man*," I say. "Some retard-weirdo."

He leans against my mother's leg.

My mother doesn't even look at me. "Not a word to your father, Lisa," she says, and she goes inside and slams the door.

I sit down on the stoop. The man sits next to me. He smells dirty and sweet, like garbage on a hot day. His eyes are big and brown. His face is lost in tangled hair. He scratches himself. I sit there and breathe his smell and wonder if he has fleas. Finally I reach out and touch his head. The fur is matted and stiff. I touch a ragged ear, then give it a yank. He doesn't even blink. Of course. It's not his real ear. I pat his head and stroke it, and his eyes sort of melt and blur on me the way a dog's eyes will when he's happy.

Then I stop and give him a shove, then a kick, then I chase him away so my father won't find him when he comes home from hunting.

It is so deathly quiet. I can hear him panting, his four-legged scamper scuttling on the sidewalk for a long time.

Last February was when things started happening. The plant closed. That meant my dad was out of work and sulking around the house all day. He'd sit and drink in front of the TV, his face big and red and his eyes all tiny from the drinking. He'd sit all scrunched up in the chair, his big head right on his

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shoulders like he had no neck at all. He'd watch the morning news, the news at noon, the evening news. "Aren't you going to look for another job?" my mother would ask. My dad would point to the TV screen and say, "What's the use?"

Then March came. Some of the stores in town closed up, and the movie place, and two of the gas stations. No new stock coming in, they said. The government needs supplies, they said. Gasoline shortage. You understand.

April: my school closed early for summer vacation. So did the high school my brothers Eliott and Pat went to. For a while they enjoyed it. Then they got bored and tried to find summer jobs. But no one was hiring. Later even more stores closed up, and restaurants. Downtown began to look like a ghost town. For a while Eliott and Pat and their friends liked to drive through at night, smashing windows and things. Then gasoline ran out.

My friend Marjorie lived two and a half blocks away, and I went there. Marjorie had two long ponytails and always thought of things to do. She taught me to hang by my knees and how to make a grass stem buzz between my thumbs. Once we drew faces on our stomachs and made them talk to each other and kiss.

Then came June. The electricity went. No air-conditioning, and it was just beginning to get hot. We missed the TV. We still sat around it sometimes and stared at it like it might all of a sudden come to life. Then one night Dad got angry and kicked the glass screen in. Now he sits and reads the paper. Every word of it, even the ads.

It's all because of the war, they say. Roads are closed off. For government use only. And the power: they say the government shut it off so the enemy can't trace it with their radars and bomb us. I think the government's hoarding it for themselves, they're all holed up in Washington watching TV, one giant slumber party.

There's nothing to do, it's deathly quiet. No cars running since the gasoline ran out. People stay in their houses now. Nobody goes out. When you do, you can see people watching you from their windows, from behind curtains, all up and

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down the street. Everyone sits and waits. That's the worst of it. Sitting and waiting. For what? The attack? Should we look at the sky? Should we look down the road? Dad keeps the news in the paper to himself. The government delivers the paper, once a week. Dad says you can't believe a word of it anyway. But still he reads it and chews his lip.

I have nothing to do because Marjorie is gone. Her family went to stay with her grandmother who lives in the city. They left in June, just before the roads closed. These days my dad says I should stay near the house, but when he is away I walk over to Marjorie's old house and just look at it. I'm afraid to hang by my knees without her. I might fall on my head.

The worst of it is the animals. Sometime in July, they all went away. Every one. You don't think about it really, until they're gone. Then the silence. No birds singing. No squirrels doing acrobatics in the trees or knocking in the attic. Even the crickets—gone. The pets have disappeared. My mother's cat Polka Dot wandered off long ago. She cried about it for days. Pets that couldn't get out died in their cages. My pet goldfish, belly-up in the bowl. Are they all dead, all those missing animals? Or did they all go somewhere else, a great exodus in the middle of the night? The flock, the pack, the herd, the horde of them. Two by two down the road? To somewhere safe? We'll never know.

"Rats deserting a sinking ship," says my dad. "They know something we don't know."

So we wait and watch the skies, watch the roads, watch the ground—who knows, they could tunnel straight through the earth and surprise us that way, where we least expect it. Technology, the technology can do anything these days, my father says. I picture technology as a big transformer robot crushing cities, slicing the sky. Germ warfare, Dad warns us. When I drink water I try to filter it through my teeth, screen out the germs. Surely they are big germs, heavily armed. We try to hold our breath.

I think radiation, when it comes, will rain down glowing like the juice inside neon signs.

No one seems to know whom we're fighting. Pat says it

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could be anyone. America has been number one for too long, and now all the little countries are ganging up on us. Anyone could be an enemy. Your next-door neighbor could be a spy.

Pat says, "Your own *sister* could be a spy, even."

"Am *not*," I say and hit him in the gut.

"I was just *kidding*, Sport," he says and whacks me a hard one. Pat has straight greasy brown hair. It hangs in his face. He hasn't had a haircut for a long time.

Eliott doesn't like to talk about whom we're fighting. He is almost old enough to get drafted. My dad says they haven't started drafting people yet, but they may, soon. He keeps telling Eliott to walk around barefoot all the time, so then maybe he'll develop flat feet and they won't want him in the army. I can't tell anymore when my dad is kidding. His eyes are always shiny. He watches us all without blinking. My mother says he has begun to grind his teeth in his sleep, keeping her up all night.

In August the beggars started coming around. My mom calls them unfortunates; my dad calls them bums. They don't have anywhere to live; they don't get government rations. They came wandering from I don't know where. First they came around asking for work, a night in the garage. Now they ask for food, scraps, even a glass of water. Now there's nothing left, and still they come by. All they seem to want is the human interaction. A little attention, some eye contact, conversation. Even when you yell at them, they seem to like it.

This one in the dog suit is a new thing.

He comes back again the day after we feed him that first time. It is almost nice to see an animal again, even if it's not a real one. He's well trained. He sits up and begs. My mother puts a morsel in his mouth. He rolls over.

"How adorable," says my mother.

"He's trying to look up your skirt," I say.

"You'd better look out, he's some nut," says Pat. "Some crazy. Some loony who hasn't seen tail in a long time. Yeah, and I don't mean a *dog* tail either."

My mother turns around and stares at him. "Where did

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you learn to speak like *that*?" she says. Pat hunches over and slinks away without answering.

I could tell her where Pat learns things. Pat and Eliott spend their nights sitting in the basement reading old *Playboy*s by the light of the moon. There's a curfew now at night so everybody has to be home, inside, before dark. Army trucks patrol the streets.

My mother strokes the man's head for a moment. Then she goes back inside. She finds things to do, she cleans the house, she keeps busy. We haven't gotten mail for months, but she still checks the mailbox. There's nothing to do, but still she bustles around all day, stays on her feet, is exhausted by evening.

My dad reads the paper every day, then goes out with his gun. He's looking for anything: a pigeon, a rabbit, a squirrel, someone's pet chicken. There's nothing out there.

Pat and Eliott keep to themselves. They don't talk to me. They wear the same clothes, day after day. Back in May they traded most of their clothes to a friend for some joints. I heard them talking about it. Now they wear the same sour-smelling jeans and T-shirts. When I go down to the basement they chase me out.

That is why I sit there on the stoop after my mother goes back inside. I sit next to the man in the dog suit. I tell him things. He cocks his head at me like he's listening, but doesn't really understand. Which is okay.

I stroke his head. It is a hot day. His nose is shiny with sweat. He pants.

It must be hot in the dog suit.

He smells worse than before. His teeth are yellow and his gums are black.

After a while I push him away. He looks back at me, wiggling his stump of tail. I chase him away again. He crawls off, whining and sobbing.

I go inside and find my mother straightening up closets. "Why does he do that, Mom? Why does he pretend he's a dog? Is he crazy?"

My mother sighs and sits back on her heels. "If he thinks

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he's a dog, why can't we let him think that? If that's what he wants, is it so hard for us to go along with it? It's the polite thing to do, don't you think?"

"I guess—" I say, though it doesn't seem *polite* to me, exactly.

"If he thinks he's a dog, then he *is* a dog," my mother says, in a way that means: that's final.

"Okay," I say. Then I look down and see what she's doing. She's sweeping out little dried carcasses from the back of the closet. Dead beetles or roaches or something. Dozens of them, curled up and hollow, legs in the air.

Now it is September. Now the man in the dog suit comes to our house every day.

My mother feeds him bits and crumbs of things. Then I play with him, tell him things. He is a good listener. I show him the bruise Pat gave me the day before, pushing me out of the basement. They don't want me down there, but sometimes I sit at the top of the stairs and listen to their voices.

I tell the man in the dog suit all this, and also about the limp dark hairs on Eliott's upper lip. And about the dark cloud that always settles in the room where my father is. I tell him about Rick Dees, my favorite DJ on the radio before the power went out. Rick Dees, I tell him, has a slick handsome voice and he must be a slick handsome man with sunglasses and movie-star eyes.

The man in the dog suit nods.

I decide to give him a name. Prince.

I tell my mother and she says, "Good. That's a good name for a dog."

Then the day comes when my father comes home too early and finds Prince on the front steps, and my mother and me stroking his back.

"What's this?" says Dad, his face going darker than ever. He's got his gun pointed at Prince, at us. His shirt is unbuttoned so I can see the tuft of fur peeking out. Prince freezes.

"Oh, Howard," says my mother, "he's not hurting anything. Really."

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"What's that you're giving him?" Dad says.

"Just trash," my mother says. "He's helping me clean up."

"He's dangerous. He could hurt you," says my dad, aiming the gun.

"He keeps the other beggars away," says my mother.

This is true. Since Prince started coming, the other beggars have avoided our house. "Like a guard dog," I say.

My dad looks at us, squinting, like he's aiming.

"Howard, let him stay. He's not doing any harm," says my mother.

"Please, Dad," I say.

And Dad, I don't know why, cocks his head and says okay and stomps into the house. A moment later he calls to my mother to find him something to eat.

I sit on the stoop with Prince. We listen and wait. We watch the sky.

October now. We're still holding our breaths, waiting. Nothing happens. It is still hot. Nobody tells us anything: how the war's going, or when school will start, or how many people are dead. I think the war is getting bigger, coming closer. No one has told me this, but I can feel the waiting, the tension buzzing in the air around my head like a hornet.

I think people are moving away. I don't see our neighbors peering from behind their curtains anymore. "They're dead," says Pat. "The government comes with trucks and clears them out in the middle of the night, when we're asleep." I think he's teasing. Maybe not.

I play in the yard with Prince. I throw the ball. He chases it, brings it back to me in his mouth.

My dad, watching us, says, "He's not a dog, he's a man, for God's sake. Treat him like a man."

But we ignore him. I throw, Prince fetches. We are having an all-American good time, just like Dick and Jane and Spot in the reader. After my dad leaves, I sing all of Rick Dees's favorite songs for Prince. Prince likes that. He barks with me.

I tell Prince all kinds of things. I know he won't laugh, like Eliott, or punch me like Pat does. He presses against me, all

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warm and furry. He would never hurt me. I am taller than he is anyway.

His face is so kind: warm, wet, blank eyes.

I have little pink bumps on my legs. Flea bites, I think, but I won't tell my mother.

"If he ever hurts you, tell me right away," says my dad.

Prince would never hurt me.

My dad thinks everybody thinks like him.

One day I see my dad in the yard, talking to Prince. "You're a human being, for God's sake. Stand up like a man. Listen to me! Take off that costume shit. I'll give you my own clothes, if you'll take it off and stand up like a man and talk to me. I know you can talk. Come here, you." And he grabs for the dog suit, tries to pull it off. Prince runs away.

One night Eliott says: "Well, you know what they say. Man's best friend."

Pat says: "Don't let him touch you. You want to end up with a litter of puppies?"

He and Eliott snigger and lean in together, their faces all twisted. Pat's face is rotten with pimples. He doesn't have any cream to put on them, so they are getting worse and worse.

Sometimes at night I creep downstairs and out onto the porch, and Prince is there sleeping or waiting. I curl up beside him and bury my face in the rough, sick-smelling fur. Prince gives my hand a lick. That is his way of saying good night.

November: the army trucks, with their ration packages and bottles of water, stop coming.

The sky is a curdled yellow color. It seems like most of our neighbors have gone on vacation, or died or disappeared or moved away, or something.

We seem to be losing.

The silence is deafening.

In December Eliott and Pat break into some houses at night, looking for food. An army patrol brings them back. If they do something like this again, they will be taken away for good.

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"Taken away where?" I say. No one will tell me.

My father has a dark look all the time now, as if a black mildew is growing and spreading on him.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, to get out of this shithole," says Pat. But he and Eliott stay in at night.

There is nothing to eat. My mother has scoured the house. She tries making us a salad of grass and things. It makes me throw up.

One time I find a bottle of Flintstones chewable vitamins in the back of my drawer. I don't want to share. I eat a whole handful and it gives me a horrible stomachache.

My legs are nice and thin now. And my bones stick out of my face in a nice way. I look like the models in the magazines. I know this because I spend a lot of time in my room now, looking in the mirror. I don't want to be with my parents, or Pat or Eliott, so I sit with the mirror to keep me company. The mirror behaves. We have conversations. Sometimes if I squint really hard into the mirror I can see Marjorie there, in the mirror-room, smiling at me.

I've been writing things down in my diary, month after month. I'm beginning to lose track of the days. They all run together. I remember when every day was different: Monday was music day at school, Wednesday I had piano lessons, Friday I went to Marjorie's house. Now they are all the same.

Sometimes I look in my closet and it surprises me to see all the clothes hanging there. Now I always wear the same shirt, and some pants all bunched up with a belt. There's no reason to change. I remember my mother used to yell at me to put on clean underpants every day. Now they are all dirty and she is too tired to yell.

Every day I go downstairs and sit on the porch. Prince is still curled up there, shivering in the cold. My dad won't let him in the house. And Prince won't leave, even though we can't feed him anymore.

He loves me. I can see this in his soft brown eyes.

I scratch him and sing to him. His fur is loose and baggy on him. I tell him secrets. Sometimes I pretend he is Rick Dees and we are on a fashionable date in his fancy car. Prince

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plays along, though he doesn't really understand. Rick Dees and I have a romantic dinner at a fancy restaurant.

My mother stays in bed most of the time now. She asks that we not disturb her. Maybe she is imagining that she is somewhere else, someone else. But who else would she want to be? She's my mother, she can't be anything else.

My brothers stay in the basement. They are making plans down there, I think. They are stroking the magazine pictures, trying to pretend they are real. I know that by now the magazine pages must be all withered from their pawing. Looking at the fleshy naked women all day must make them hungrier.

Only my dad still goes out, every day, with his gun. He walks unsteadily, hanging onto things, but still he goes. He still seems to think there is something out there, something to put in the pot.

There's nothing left. There hasn't been for months. But he refuses to believe it.

Then suddenly it gets colder. Is it because of the war, because of a bomb? I wonder. Or is it just a very cold December? My mother comes downstairs, my brothers come upstairs, and we all settle in the living room. The bedrooms and the basement are too cold. It is warmer with all of us together, and the living room is better insulated. We hardly speak to each other. My brothers seem to speak by looks: they snicker suddenly, together, at nothing. And my parents speak with stares and shrugs. Me, I don't look at anybody, I stay in my corner with my winter coat and my blanket. Two of my teeth are loose. They shouldn't be.

I still spend a few hours a day with Prince on the porch. Most of the time he stays curled up against the side of the house, trying to steal some of the warmth. Once in a while he crawls around the yard, trying to warm himself up.

I'm too tired these days to sing. Just opening my mouth gives me a headache.

Prince understands. He is the only one who understands me.

Then one day I come in from the porch. It's starting to get dark so early, now that it's winter. I come into the living room

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and it's all in shadow. I can't see anyone's face clearly, all I see are their teeth shining.

It is so quiet. Then I hear their breathing, each one of them separately like singers not in harmony. They are all waiting for something.

"I wish I had a steak," says Eliott, his voice strained and high.

A pause.

"In Africa they eat grubs and things. Maybe there are worms in the backyard," says Pat.

"You can eat dandelion greens. I've heard of a dandelion salad," says Eliott.

Pat says, "I heard in Korea people eat dogs."

No one says anything. I can see the room get darker.

Then my dad stands up.

"What are you doing?" my mother says. He doesn't answer.

"Where are you going? Howard—don't—don't—"

My dad is reaching for his gun. My brothers stand up.

"What are you doing? How can you even think of—"

They are walking slowly to the door.

"He's a man, Howard! A man! You can't—" my mother screams.

"He's a dog," says my dad. "He's an animal."

And then I see the door swing open, see Prince lift his head expectantly. I see my dad lift the gun and aim. I'm trying to get over there, I can't get there fast enough, the air is too thick. They're framed in the doorway, my dad and my brothers, and beyond them I see Prince pause, showing the whites of his eyes, wind ruffling the fur on his head. Then he's running, galloping on all fours across the yard, his tongue hanging out like a pink streamer. A shot rings out echoing in the silence, but it misses him, he keeps running, and then he's up, up on his hind legs, lurching away two-footedly, front legs pawing the air, and then another shot rings out, shaking the world, and he's down, down, splayed out on our front lawn, nose in the dirt, tail in the air, wind whipping his fur around, his legs quivering then still.

I try to go to him but it's too late. My dad and Eliott and Pat beat me to him.

They run across the lawn, the pack of them, and fall upon him snarling.

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Annie Finch

In the Great Reading Room

Knowledge is huge and generous. Here she sits,
bracing her legs like pillars so they'll hold
the book she opens, peeking at Peace's old
wrinkled face, letting the jesters and the wits
encircle her, and watching the Great Red Spirit's
wooden-limbed presence loom on the books and gold,
the overwhelming fruits just now unrolled
from Progress's advancing chariots
as dazzled Natives hide their eyes. This room
spins on its murals, dragging her vision past
heads bowed toward books whose turning pages hide
truth with each tiny rustle. Teachers whom
we still depend on taunt her with their vast,
ennobling pain; we read on by their side.

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Lucille Clifton

shadows

in the latter days
you will come to a place
called memphis.
there you will wait for awhile
by the river mississippi
until you can feel the shadow
of another memphis and another
river. nile.

wake up girl.
you dreaming.

the sign may be water or fire
or it may be the black earth
or the black blood under the earth.
or it may be the syllables themselves
coded to you from your southern kin.

wake up girl.
i swear you dreaming.

memphis.
capital of the old kingdom
of ancient egypt at the apex
of the river across from the
great pyramids.
nile. born in the mountains
of the moon.

wake up girl.
this dont connect.

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wait there.
in the shadow of your room
you may see another dusky woman
weakened by too much loss.
she will be dreaming a small boat
through centuries of water
into the white new world.
she will be weaving garments
of neglect.

wake up girl.
this dont mean nothing.

meaning is the river
of voices. meaning
is the patience of the moon.
meaning is the thread
running forever in shadow.

girl girl wake up.
somebody calling you.

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Two Poems by David Lehman

Boy with Red Hair

1

The boy was shy. He was quietly bored in the dark house but too nice to say so.

One afternoon at three-thirty the mother didn't show up and the boy had to take a taxi from school to house. He was furious with her. "He was so angry he reminded me of you," the mother told her ex-husband.

"I guess I inherit my absentmindedness from her," said the boy.
He was old-fashioned, with freckles and red hair,
and when they drove through a tollbooth
the man at the tollbooth would say, "Hi, Red."

The boy and his grandfather had several things in common.
Both were soft-spoken, sincere hypochondriacs.
Their favorite fruits were strawberries in summer
and pears in fall.

A parrot alighted on the boy's shoulder.
See, the cage's door was wide open the whole time.
Later, the boy made eye contact
with a butterfly settling on his shoe.

The boy was slow in the bathroom, thinking
while brushing his teeth.
What was he thinking about?
"Did you know Jack Nicholson played a killer

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in *Cry Baby Killer*, his first movie?"
Hours later he couldn't reconstruct the thought processes that had led to this moment.

2

The boy put his yellow and brown checked pajama bottoms around his head and became Invulnerable Man.
Swinging himself around,
he knocked down a vase, which crashed.
And then he got quiet, very quiet.

The boy had a respect for silence.
He didn't say one word more than was strictly necessary.
On the phone he would say *uh-huh* and *yes* and little else.

He liked long car trips. His father asked,
What would you paint—the clouds
or the trees—if you were a painter?
The boy thought for what seemed like a long time.
He thought it would be difficult to paint the clouds.
Ladders weren't long enough.

3

That night he slept in the Chateau d'If.

"Do not underestimate me," said the German commandant.
"From this prison there is no escape."
The boy had heard these words before. He knew what came next.
The commandant needed to make an example of somebody.
He would pick a prisoner at random and have him hanged.
This would frighten the others,
and the hunger strike would be over.
In prison there was plenty of time to imagine the scene.

In prison there was time to waste, wondering why he was there,
making appeals, pleading for a hearing,

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when he should have been playing on the porch
listening to the birds singing
or digging a tunnel from his bed
to the mad priest's cell, substituting
his body for the dead man's in the shroud
after memorizing the map of his secret treasure,
ready to return to life, to swim all the way
to Paris if necessary, a nobleman in a cape,
ready to exact his revenge.

Wedding Song

Poetry is a criticism of life
As a jailbreak is a criticism of prison.
I now pronounce you man and wife.

The pencil has no chance against the knife,
You can't compete with television.
Poetry used to be a criticism of life.

Because you play together like a drum and fife
On the Fourth of July, your favorite season,
I now pronounce you man and wife.

The sonnets resisted, though they were rife
With clues subjected to a critic's misprison:
Poetry may not be a criticism of life.

In a field full of purple loosestrife,
Does happiness require a reason?
I now pronounce you man and wife.

The fruits of peace, to be peeled with a knife,
Await your teeth. It's your decision.
Is poetry a criticism of life?
I now pronounce you man and wife.

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Philip Appleman

A Priest Forever

The first time?
So long ago—that brown-eyed boy . . .
How can I say this, your Reverences,
so you'll understand? Maybe
it was the tilt of his pretty neck
when he pondered the mysteries—Grace,
the Trinity—the way his lower lip
curled like a petal, the way . . .
But *you* know what I mean—down
from your high pulpits and into the dirty streets—
you know there are some provocations
the good Lord made no sinew
strong enough to resist. Think
of David and Jonathan, snarled forever
in a tender web as tough as twine—
like that, maybe—like being driven
by flames, deep in the places we hide,
renounce, deny . . .

No, Monsignor, try to understand—
if your inquest here is meant
to "evaluate" me again, then
you have to feel that fever in the loins
when a child's face looks up
from the wafer-thin body of Christ, innocent
eyes flooding with wonder. You have to see
that the Lord, the good Lord,
has willed something beyond commandments,
beyond dogma, beyond law or custom,
something—irresistible . . .

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All right—the first time—
of course I remember.
It was a smoldering August afternoon,
the hottest day in the history
of this whole state and there
in the cobweb aftermath
of too many questions—what is mortal sin,
what are the dangers to chastity?—alone,
almost alone in the church, after
my little pupils had all run off
to baseball, ice cream, whatever,
he lingered on, in the dim vestry . . .

Well, if you insist, I did ask him
to stay—because,
after all those catechism lessons, there was still
one urgent question hanging
in the clammy air,
and inch by inch, among the ghostly chasubles,
we found ourselves edging closer to it.
Somehow, then, my anointed hand was blessing
his brown hair, one finger ordained to touch
the petal of that lower lip. And there
in that sweaty room—dear Jesus, how I still
feel the heat—I . . . We . . .

Yes, of course—the others. All
the others . . . But after the first time,
how do you tell them apart?
Let's see—there was a blue-eyed kid
with an angel's tongue—what was his name?
And a cherub with golden hair, who
used his indifference like a tease, and . . .
Sixty-eight of them, did you say? All
testifying to . . .

What? I? "Ruined their lives"?
Wait a minute, let's get this straight—

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my passion *gave* them a life, gave them
something rich and ripe in their green youth,
something to measure all intimate flesh against,
forever. After that,
they ruined their own lives, maybe.
But with me they were full of a love
firmer than anything their meager years
had ever tasted . . .

Love, you heard me—you
with all your degrees, your tight mouths,
your clinical jargon, don't tell me
you've never had a movement below your belt
that wasn't intestinal. Listen,
this is not in Aquinas,
not in our learned encyclicals. But
there's a force that moves in our marrow,
that slithered there, long before
theology—something with ape in it,
something with the squirm of snakes,
the thrust of rams. And whatever it is,
it knows what it wants . . .

Ah—your glittering eyes
show me you understand. And your ramrod backs
tell me you'll never admit it.
But I'm not alone here, am I?
We're in this together, the same old
celibate fix—"It's better
to marry than to burn," our little
inside joke. And it all comes down
to one poor sinner in a straight-back chair
entertaining a dozen sanctimonious . . .

That word is for the record, Monsignor.
Remember the last time we met like this—
how I pleaded time, place, circumstance,
mitigating niceties, anything but the truth.

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And how you enjoyed flaying me then—
you nailed me to lust like a rugged cross,
brushed aside my passion, turned your back
on my word made flesh, hoping
that no more boyish voices
would speak its name to daylight . . .

Yes, Reverends, I learned
a little something then, in all that
groveling—learned that whatever
the meek may wangle in this life,
whatever skimpy joy they manage
to snuggle up to at night, one thing
is as certain as graveyards—the meek
will never, in any shy season,
inherit the earth.
So excuse me if I don't
bob and duck this time.
You have your job to do, go ahead,
throw me to the wolves
and pay off my little lovers—
plaintiffs, have it your way—
hush them up with a million bucks
in widows' pennies. Not a bad price
for all that ecstasy . . .

Oh, I know where I'm headed—
to "therapy," as we always say,
a little paid vacation
with others who loved not wisely
but too young—and also, of course,
with the usual slew of dehydrating
whiskey priests. But don't forget
that when they say I'm "recovered" again,
they'll send me off to another parish,
with more of those little lambs—a priest,
after all, is a priest forever.
Meanwhile, as I bide my time,

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and count my beads, and hum to myself
those luscious songs of Solomon,
what I'll be thinking about—
rely on this, Your Reverences—
what I'll be thinking about
is that brown-eyed boy
with the graceful neck, and the lower lip
that curled like a petal.

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Martha Collins

Pinks

If you wanted flesh you had to wait
till second grade, for the box
of 64. Until then you outlined us
in orange, or maybe filled us in,
but then we looked like Halloween.
You never used white, though white came
in the 16 box; it didn't show, and besides,
white was wrong: we looked like ghosts.
Of course you could use pink. But pink
was too pink, like flowers, or clothes.

•

To pink is to thrust is to pierce
(with a bullet), to scallop (with little
eyes) along the edge, as in (perhaps,
depending on dates) the flower behind
(most likely) the color.

•

Ascot Carnea Delicata
Lady Blanche Harry Hooper Mrs. Simkins
Attraction Criterion Reliance

•

Pink-cheeked pink-lipped
sea-pink shell-pink

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At the turn
of the century pink
was the color for boys

•

You only used flesh
for flesh. It was wrong
even for flowers, which was where,
around the house, you could use
almost any color in the box.
It wasn't pink or peach.
It wasn't pretty.
It was skin.

•

Pink was what some of us got
in summer, which wasn't as good
as tan or brown, and browner
than even some blacks was best,
though we didn't say blacks
back then and of course
it was clear you really
weren't, though you might
have a touch of Indian
blood: my friend was related
to Pocahontas, who was better
than anyone anyone else could claim.

•

The library had, in its children's
section, stories of Young Americans
covered in orange. The illustrations
were silhouettes, i.e. the people
were black. But among the dozens

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of orange books, there were only two
about blacks. Most of the women
were Mothers and Wives; all
except Pocahontas were white.

•

George Washington Carver made
the peanut (underground, tan)
the second largest crop in the South
after cotton (aboveground, white).

•

white sheets pink blanket white
spread white skirt on a dressing
table white curtains a dancing doll
in pink-white skirts to match the pink
and white-lace wallpaper walls

•

Our mothers took us to see *The Red Shoes*,
where a woman who had to choose
between love and art danced to death.

But we weren't allowed to see *Pinky*,
a whispered-about movie where a black
(Negro) woman passed for white.

•

There was a kid my parents knew, with pink
eyes, white hair and skin, and a girl I saw
in a restaurant, with white hair and skin
like the porcelain of a nineteenth-century doll.

•

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When white Emily Henderson
is crossed with a blue sweet pea,
purple offspring result. When white
Emily (long pollen grains) is crossed
with white Emily (round), the offspring
is purple, or bicolor red,
a type known as Painted Lady.

•

But in the region Mississippi
Farabee observed albino Negroes
taller and broader than black
We may assume stature
and breadth superiority
and if valid in man evidence
albinization correlated not
with but with greater perfection

•

It's everything: the pink
of perfection. To pink is to beautify.

But pink is also something small.
Lift that pinkie. Tickled pink.

And a man in pink is one who hunts,
a pinkish person one who might be red.

•

What if it said race and you had to check pink?
What if white meant only your shirt
or some blankness or parts of your eyes?

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Of course you could think pure or spotless or good
but you might need proof. And as for strong,
remember the black leather jacket, the dark suit.

•

maiden maidenly meadow swamp

and one red sock washed it pink

as pink as riven snow

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Jeffery Donaldson

The Spoils of Patronage

April 16, 1902

Dear Papa, a triumphant opening!
I know the show won't last, isn't supposed
to last with Secession artists, for whom

endurance is never the point, and where
the new idea is to pull a work down
before the critics can take it apart.

And yet the brief moment of its unveiling
will have a lasting place, you can be sure,
in the minds of all who were here to see,

and it's a crime you were not here yourself
to reap the harvest of your generous
offices. But since you would not attend—

and I hope rain follows you the whole way
into the mountains, for so having fled—
I'll apprise you of the day's excitement.

It was a trial at first. Not that I felt
embarrassed to play patron sent in place
of the Patron Saint, but just not prepared

for the fuss they made, their strident favors
and attentions—"my dear child, you are
the very incarnation of your father,

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and yet how much more enticing than he,
if I may say so, for our young artists!"
Efforts they redoubled, I'm sure, knowing

that the impression of their gratitude
must work by proxy. Herr Klimt stepped forward
as my escort, and led me to the frieze

that he seemed most concerned I come to
in a proper light and best state of mind,
by circular means: he plied me with drink,

sweetmeats, and little sandwiches tied up
with a kind of edible string, and took
me round through the press of raised elbows

and a champagne glass tintinnabula
to a niche apart, where that composer
you once spoke to me about—the director

of the Staatsoper, who spends our money,
you've said, on pricey Wagner productions
and writing his own music off season—

with a respectful nod in my direction,
stirred a small ensemble of woodwinds
into a fat, plump, watery prattle

that lulled our senses above the din
of laughter and conversation. That done,
Herr Klimt steered me to the next room, but not

before he sprang the news that you yourself
anticipated: "it has been a great
challenge, my dear lady, to paint one who,

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so young, so angelic, is in herself
already a vision, and has outshone
any grace that my poor art could bestow.

I hope you will be pleased. With your beauty,
we have together created a gift
worthy of your kind father's great legacy."

Forewarned is forearmed, Papa. I was not
caught off guard by his beguiling homage,
but I must confess . . . I sincerely hope

that it will not disappoint, since I know
he intends my image as a tribute
to yourself, if I voice my displeasure.

I mean no offense. I've had occasion
to enjoy the bright fruit of your painter's
labors. Even the frieze he next revealed

called to mind an attractive bliss—"Longing
for Happiness Finds Rest in Poetry"—
floating angels and a woman of taste

are poised in the primer of a white abyss,
the airs of heaven distilled in deep tides
of unstirred, watery milk that spills

and slides in a mild Empyrean,
whose only verge is the fresco of sky
stuccoed on the ceiling above our heads,

as if the risen ether where we move
were a clay alembic, to which we bring,
like bitter herbs and salve, a state of mind.

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The woman at the harp who bows her head
and seems to trail a hand through calm water
stands for poetry. The gold leaf inlaid

above her harp's to show us what they hear,
the angels who, full of sleep, float in waves
on their fronts and backs, in lithe finery,

and give no thought to the cold crest that bears
them touchingly into the aureate
peels of piano above the lyre.

But Papa, I'm the one! It's me they drift
selflessly towards. Or some *femme fatale*
in my likeness! Now, my admiration

is boundless for the riches Klimt bestows
on the ordinary. But what woman can
help but see the designs he has on me!

The smock he stands me up in is a shroud!
The angels too shoulder gowns of weightless,
wafer-thin gold leaf and sumptuous silk

studded with bright cell-clusters of onyx.
He takes all the palette for his nature:
not a bodice, pleat or waistband is left

uncoursed by his dream of the first water
(picture loose dry-grass banking on a brook,
the dry loosestrife among leafy poplars,

and beneath a head-clearing helium
balloon of azure rising out of sight,
shades of villagers move in arabesque).

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A dress that Achilles himself, with pride,
might have carried with him into battle,
or worn for that matter, and not bothered

with a shield! Papa, the angelic orders
should be approached, I feel, like a cold bath,
quickly in and then quickly out again.

It's not that I don't believe in Repose
of Poetry—nice enough for poems—
but it's just as well that the dreams on which

we hang our fortune should fall away,
be taken down, and allowed to become,
in time, like everything we put above

our heads, more like us. I believe Herr Klimt
understands as much, since his seraphim
are to be dismantled when the gallery

is closed at month's end. That makes a better
vision to my mind. I for one won't rest
until I stand amid the loosed debris

of these Beatified, and find, pictured
on the ruckled stone, ghosts who have returned
to earth mere relics of themselves, resigned

to see that heaven's chilled aquamarines
and its clear nib of lumen buoyed beyond
the pale are handed down to us as well,

in puzzle shapes thrown out across the floor,
like scraps of the builder's wood, or like shards
of pottery under the potter's wheel.

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And in my angels' lowered eyes, not the poet's
counterfeit amazement, but a *sort of* tact,
the look of having learned what women know,

that our lives are a long series of discards,
and our interest lies in what we have
discarded. Papa, when I am older,

and should your riches fall into my hands,
I would spend by that rule, as now I pay
in kind, with all my love,
your faithful daughter.

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Three Poems by Richard Tayson

Phone Sex

Sometimes I am so lonely the phone
will do.
Sometimes I am so lonely and you are not
dead, you
live in Brooklyn Heights yet I cannot
touch you.
I have spent 30 years trying not to write
this poem.
Sometimes I am so lonely the phone
will do.

•

Under the paper lantern of sleep, the sudden memory: living in Colorado, pulling on my boots, going out into the blizzard, the snow burning a hole in my tongue. I am nearly frozen, standing in front of a house unfamiliar to us both, knowing you will take me in and we will make angry love in front of the fire. I let you take not gently the clothes from me. I would have done anything you wanted: the prosthetic devices, the rope, the food, I made myself sticky with honey and let you have this and that part of me, I was stuck like paper to the wall, letting you have me dry then wet while your wife looked on from her photo by the bed.

•

You will be automatically matched with the next caller or will hear radio until the next caller becomes available. To speak to somebody else press the pound key under the 9 on your Touch-Tone dial.

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•

Black fishnet stockings
clothespins clamped to his nipples
bananas by the bed bowl
of water soap green washcloth
razors banana in his mouth he slits
the skin with his teeth razor
in my hand his black hairs
come off the blade like scales:

summer, 1970. I am 8,
Kenny skins the fish
on the dock, throws the guts
in the lake, watches
the heavy blood sink. Skin
white as buttocks beneath the moon.

He bleeds slowly
never moans
arms and legs
splayed kindergarten star
banana halfway in him he arches
his back two, then
three
then six
then myself

press the pound key to speak to
somebody else

eat white banana meat
iron-smell of blood

press the pound key to speak to
somebody else

he wants to tell me his fantasy.

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•

In Puerto Rico your wife looks at me from across the table. Your two-year-old daughter pees on the floor. The air sticky as pee. I look into your wife's eyes then over at you by the window, your back to us. Your son bounces a red ball into the apartment, sings in Spanish. He called me "Pappi Dos" today, put your hand in mine as we walked through the town. That was the moment I trace back to my self-hatred. Your wife looks at me. Sticky sweet of overripe mangoes on the table. She has left Argentina for this. You have told her the truth, or the nearest approximation: *Faeries de Norteamérica, Pájaros de la Habana, Jotos de Méjico, Sarasas de Cádiz, Apios de Sevilla, Cancos de Madrid, Floras de Alicante, Adelaidas de Portugal*. And your wife stares at me from across the table.

•

99 cents per minute, maximum of 20 minutes

I want you to talk dirty to me

Beat your cock against the receiver

in a glass elevator in a park on a seesaw against a tree on the edge of a bridge on the hood of my father's car

press the pound key

tied up, my mouth gagged

Slap it around a little bit

or you will hear radio until the next caller

Finger it

anyone over 15 is not my style

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Slap it around a little bit

under the 9 on your Touch-Tone dial

I love all men's cocks

Finger it

Slap it.

•

I have spent 30 years trying not to write
this poem.

Who fucked you, how many times, and where?

I knew you were there before I heard your voice
yelling *Bravo!* when the bassoonist finished her concert.
Trying not to look at me.
Your red corduroy shirt flashing
as you left the music hall.
Colorado night, sweet clear summer, sweet clear soul,
we're talking again, outside the music hall.
Nightfall.
Your hand grips my hand.
Soap bubbles in the tub, you want to sleep with me.
Even after I say no you crawl through the window.

Who fucked you, how many times?

You knew I would fall in love that night.

•

I was ready to finish your letter last night but as usual something happened and I couldn't. At work, started with vomits, my boss went to the pharmacy and bought some medicines.

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How many times and where?

I haven't been feeling well, a lot of stomach ache and I have some purple spots on my chest.

I have spent 30 years trying not to write
this poem.

•

Don't call every night, you're not rich, save your money to come to San Juan.

You said you had a magic phone.
It made free calls.
Don't waste your money, you said.
Call me late, I said.
Call me early, I said.
What about your wife, I said.

Every night
I felt your terror
though we had no name for
it.
Purple spots on your legs, arms, belly.
We had no name for
it.

Vomiting, don't call.

•

And when I called
you had a new boyfriend.
Golden boy, bodybuilder, accountant.
Living in Brooklyn, you said.

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I have my green card, you said.
We bought a king-size bed, you said.
We use the same toothbrush, you said.

•

Static on the line, the garbled buzz
of jammed signals. I hold out for
the right words
but get the fourth blond 6' 2" blue-eyed
muscley 23-year-old tonight
named David.

Under the gummed eyelid of sleep,
the tops and bottoms
become interchangeable, the sounds
melt down to slogans, acronyms, holy
ellipses

until words stick in my throat,
dissolve slowly,
with lessening pleasure
like the gum drops
Father brought home
then stopped bringing

home. Word:
something to lick, paw,
insert yourself into.
The need to name in a time
of silence.
I do not know if sex is an illusion
says the woman to her lover
across the table. And I row

downriver toward limitless
sleep, float
on a wordless sea

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in a bed-shaped raft. Splinters
in my palm as I
stitch your real name
to my crotch for the time
when you will be unable
to speak and I unable
to forget.

Peschanka

The Russian town near what is now Volgograd, where the German Sixth Army lost the battle of Stalingrad in the winter of 1943, and 250,000 soldiers died.

I read about the man who stood
50 years after the battle and saw
the field of human skeletons.
He bent close to the loamy earth
and took the photograph of one
skull, scream of the open
mouth, jawbone
broken, left molar
missing, and when I look up,
you sleep beside the open window.
You are letting the sun in, spring
in, your mouth open
against the ocher grain of the easy
chair, and suddenly you are not
breathing. I
put the magazine down, go to you and
touch your knee, when you do not
wake, I reach up, press
my hand to your mouth, as one who
wants to save another the torture
of slow death will place the pillow
over his face and press down

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gently. I want to be
merciful, as I was told God is
merciful, I want to say *lie down*
my love in the green pasture, and
then I feel the gold silk of your
breath on my palm, and in my joy
I close the window, as if finally
locking the heavy cathedral
door. I touch
your shaved head, the stubble
pliant as grass shoots pressing
up through your skull, I pull your
mouth to mine, and you
breathe, it's
summer, the fever
takes you and beats you, as the man
in the photograph was taken and
beaten and left to die.

Your Feet

When we climbed the black stone,
I was already in love
with your feet. I hadn't
seen them up close, so
when we made it to the top
and you lifted them into my lap,
I was shocked at how small they were.
I rubbed my palm along the arch
and thought of the Chinese girl
whose mother broke her bones
and bound her feet in the rough
sack cloth, I pulled
your socks off and pressed
the rounded bone at the ball

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of your sole, you moaned
that must be where my liver is,
toe joints I cracked,
that must be where your spine is.
So I held your spine and
massaged your brain—and that night
we molded our bodies together
for the first time, we
kissed for 5 years, 23 days
until the first purple spot
appeared on your foot.
You cried, I
cradled it, held it
to my mouth and sucked
the death cells out,
I kissed the lesion away,
arch-bone, ankle joint, fibula,
I learned to love small things,
your mouth, fist
of earth, first snow, for better
and for worse, we
settled in for the duration.

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Andrew McCord

At an Exhibit of Mughal Painting

And there you are, painted into the picture:
Bricklayers and courtiers are making their beds
In apartments on the margins behind you.

Ox-drivers rest on their loads, hesitant
To leave the market for the country road.
Under a rain-roof, you are looking off.

You've been made ready and left unattended.
Your hair falls down where your robe falls open.
Below, invisible to the glance you fix

On the blue border of night surrounding
The miniature, made-perfect city—
A figure stands by a shut door in shadow.

There in the dust, he recalls the painter's
Swirled quotation: "It's not just me
Who searches for his heart in this alleyway—"

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An Encounter

Barney Rosset, the founder of the Grove Press in the early fifties as well as the distinguished literary and political magazine, the Evergreen Review *(both institutions published Samuel Beckett's earliest work) lives and works in a Greenwich Village walk-up where he now publishes the Blue Moon Press. The offices are a long way up—four flights. On the third floor is a loft-like room. At the far end is a Ping-Pong table with one end up on its hinges so that half the table faces the player like a backboard. Rosset goes down there on occasion and practices.*

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that you once played Ping-Pong with Samuel Beckett back in the fifties.?

BARNEY ROSSET

He knew that I played Ping-Pong, or more properly table tennis, and that I was good at it. Perhaps I told him. Anyway one day we walked up the Boulevard St. Germain looking for a place to play. We couldn't find one. Finally we ended up in a billiard parlor on the corner of St. Germain and the

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Boulevard St. Michel. Up on the second floor. I'd played pool, but I didn't know how to play billiards. Billiards was a big thing of Beckett's. We played. He put a good face on it, being sweet, nice, and trying to show me what to do, but it was a disaster.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of an athlete was Beckett?

ROSSET

He was a fine athlete. I have photographs of him as a stalwart member of his prep school cricket team. In the fifties he was troubled with cataracts. He would stagger around on the street because he wasn't seeing well. People used to think he was drunk. They took it for granted: "Well, he's had too much." Eventually he had a successful operation.

INTERVIEWER

Was he interested in sports? Did he keep up with them?

ROSSET

He was a great enthusiast. I remember we went to Roland Garros to watch what turned out to be one of the greatest tennis matches I ever saw—a semifinal in a professional tournament between Lew Hoad and Pancho Gonzales. The umpire was a Basque whom Beckett knew; they waved at each other as we came in. At one point in the match Gonzales got very upset at the umpire, threw his racquet up into the stands and said he wouldn't continue unless they threw the umpire out. So they did this, and as he left the stadium the umpire waved up at Beckett. You would have thought someone in a situation like that would have something else on his mind than to wave at a friend. Oh yes, a lot of sports people knew Beckett. One of his favorite places was a bar/restaurant called the Ile de Matisse, a seafood place with photographs of sports figures on the wall. Beckett's was up there next to Sugar Ray Robinson's.

INTERVIEWER

Did you compete against him in anything else?

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ROSSET

He tried to teach me how to play chess, at which he was also very good. He played chess with friends by mail—in Yugoslavia, in Germany. He failed as miserably teaching me chess as he had billiards.

INTERVIEWER

Eventually though you played Ping-Pong.

ROSSET

He found a place with a table—an inn near his house outside Paris. We drove out there in his Citroën deux chevaux—that crazy sardine-can automobile with its front wheels turned inward so that it swayed like being in a ship, and he was driving, and of course he couldn't see. It was like being in a Beckett novel.

INTERVIEWER

What was the result out there in the inn?

ROSSET

I was better than he was. First of all, I could see, and I'm pretty good at table tennis. I've played a lot.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think he was so anxious to play Ping-Pong, if he knew you were so good?

ROSSET

I think he wanted to find a game he knew I could really play because he had beaten me so badly at billiards and then chess. He had just humiliated me. He wanted to make me feel better.

INTERVIEWER

How did he take being defeated?

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ROSSET

Just as well as he took winning at billiards. Beckett was a gentleman; I think they may have invented the word for him — a gentle, sweet human being who some people thought was unfriendly because he didn't say anything. Beckett was an intense listener. He listened to you as if you were the only human being in the world. With each person he was like a deep lover. Sometimes it was disconcerting, especially to those who didn't know him. Richard Avedon, I remember, got almost hysterical because he thought Beckett was being hostile. In his nervousness he began telling crazy stories about photographing snakes in Texas. He went rambling on and on, Beckett sitting there listening very intently, along with me and my two children. Avedon was very upset. Well, anyway, that's the way it was.

— George Plimpton
New York City
October 28, 1995

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Rick Bass is the author of *Platte River*, *The Watch* and five books about the outdoors, including *Oil Notes*, *Winter* and *The Ninemile Wolves*. *The Lost Grizzlies: A Search for Survivors in the Wilderness of Colorado* appeared last November.

Judy Budnitz is a writing fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "Dog Days" is her first published story.

David Means is the author of *A Quick Kiss of Redemption*, a collection of short stories. He received a New York Foundation for the Arts fiction grant in 1994.

POETRY

Philip Appleman's *The Voyage Home: New and Selected Poems* will be published by the University of Arkansas Press in 1996.

Lucille Clifton is the author of over thirty books. A new collection of poetry, in which these poems appear, is forthcoming in 1996.

Martha Collins is working on a collection of translations of poems by the Vietnamese writer Nguyen Quang Thieu, to be published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1996.

Patricia Corbus's poems have appeared in various journals, and she is completing her first book of poetry.

Jeffery Donaldson teaches modern poetry at McMaster University in Ontario. His first book is *Once Out of Nature*.

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Annie Finch is the author of *Catching the Mer-mother*. Her manuscript of poems, *No Snake*, was a finalist in the 1994 National Poetry Series.
Edwin Gallaher's recent poetry and art criticism have appeared in *Artlies*, *Borderlands*, *Gulf Coast* and the *Western Humanities Review*.
Debora Greger's fourth book of poems, *Off-Season at the Edge of the World*, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 1994.
Jeffrey Harrison's book of poems, *The Singing Underneath*, was selected by James Merrill for the National Poetry Series in 1987 and published by E.P. Dutton in 1988.
James Laughlin's collection of epigrams, *Heart Island*, appeared this summer and *The Country Road*, a collection of poems, last fall.
David Lehman's new collection of poems, *Valentine Place*, will be published by Scribners this winter. He is the series editor of *The Best American Poetry*.
Patrick Martin is the managing editor of *Gulf Coast*.
Andrew McCord's work has appeared in *Agni*, *Conjunctions*, *Partisan Review* and *The Yale Review*.
Carol Muske has a volume of collected criticism forthcoming from The University of Michigan "Poets on Poetry" Series and is completing her *New and Selected Poems*.
Karen L. Newcombe's chapbook, *Single Necessity*, was published last summer by Chi Chi Press, San Francisco.
William Olsen's second collection of poetry, *Vision of a Storm Cloud*, was published by Triquarterly Press last fall.
John Peck's *Argura* appeared with Sheep Meadow Press last fall, *Selva Morale* last summer with Carcanet, U.K., and another book of poems is forthcoming.
John Reibetanz's *Midland Swimmer* will be published by Brick Books this spring.
Jay Rogoff won the 1994 Washington Prize for his book of poetry, *The Cutoff*, published by The Word Works.
Kay Ryan is the author of *Strangely Marked Metal* and *Flamingo Watching*. She received a 1995 Ingram Merrill Award.
Vijay Seshadri's poems and essays have appeared in many periodicals. A first collection of his poems is forthcoming from Graywolf Press.
Charles Simic published two new books in 1994: *A Wedding in Hell*, a collection of poetry and *The Unemployed Fortune Teller*, a collection of essays. He received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1990.
Richard Tayson's poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Crazyhorse* and other publications.
Nance Van Winckel's second collection of poems, *The Dirt*, was published in 1994 by University of Miami Press.

FEATURES

Olga Carlisle is currently working on a book about Russian entrepreneurs called *The New Russians*.

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E.L. Doctorow's most recent novel is *The Waterworks*.
Francine du Plessix Gray is the author most recently of *Rage and Fire*, a life of Louise Colet. She is currently working on a book called *At Home with the Marquis de Sade*.
Jeffrey Eugenides is the author of a novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, a portion of which was published in *The Paris Review* and won the Aga Khan Prize for Fiction.
Ian Frazier writes humor and non-fiction and lives in Missoula, Montana.
Jorie Graham's selected poems, *The Dream of the Unified Field*, appeared this fall.
Jim Harrison, a poet and novelist, lives in northern Michigan.
Thom Jones is the author of two short-story collections, *The Pugilist at Rest*, a National Book Award finalist, and *Cold Snap*. He teaches at the Iowa Writers Workshop.
Norman Mailer is the author, most recently, of *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Artist*.
Patrick McGrath is the author of a collection of stories, *Blood and Water and Other Tales*, and two novels, *The Grotesque* and *Spider*.
Susan Minot's most recent novel is *Folly*. She wrote the screenplay for Bernardo Bertolucci's *Stealing Beauty*, which will be released this spring.
Bradford Morrow's most recent novel is *Trinity Fields*.
George Plimpton is the editor of *The Paris Review*. His latest book, published last spring by W.W. Norton and Company, is *The X Factor*.
James Salter is the author of many short stories, screenplays and novels, including *A Sport and a Pastime*, published by Paris Review Editions in 1967 and recently republished by *Modern Library*.
Joanna Scott's most recent book is a collection of short fiction, *Various Antidotes*. Her novel, *The Manikin*, is forthcoming from Henry Holt in 1996.
Gregor von Rezzori is the author of many novels, including *Death of My Brother Abel* and *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*. His memoir *Anecdotage; A Summation* is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux. His translator, **Susan Bernofsky** is also the translator of a book of poems by Robert Walser. She is completing her PhD in comparative literature at Princeton University.
Oliver Stone is the cowriter, director and producer of several films, most recently *Nixon*.
Paul West's fifteenth novel, *Love's Mansion*, won the 1993 Lannan Prize for Fiction. *Sporting with Amaryllis*, a novel about the poet John Milton, will appear in 1996.

INTERVIEWS

Edward Hirsch (Susan Sontag interview) teaches at the University of Houston and has written four books of poems: *For the Sleepwalkers*, *Wild Gratitude*, *The Night Parade* and *Earthly Measures*.

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Ronald A. Sharp (George Steiner interview) is the John Crowe Ransom Professor of English at Kenyon College. He co-edited *The Norton Book of Friendship* with Eudora Welty and edited *Reading George Steiner*.

ART

Brian D. Cohen is the founder and owner of Bridge Press, which is dedicated to fine art limited-edition artist books and etchings and letterpress printing. **Medrie MacPhee** is represented by the Paolo Baldacci Gallery in New York. **Malcolm Morley**'s drawing is printed here courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery in New York.

Newspapers and newsmagazines around the world announced Terry Southern's death on October 30, 1995. He was a long-time friend of *The Paris Review*. An excerpt from his novel, *Flash and Filigree*, appeared in the initial number of the Review in the spring of 1953—the first of a number of contributions made over the years, including an interview in the art of fiction series he conducted with Henry Green. We are pleased to announce that a section of the next issue will be devoted to his work—including an essay by Henry Allen, reminiscences and comments by his associates from the literary and film worlds, and some original material from his own files. We can do no less. And none too soon. It has been reported that his last words were: "What's the delay?"

NB: We would like to thank Annabel Merullo for researching and providing a number of the Russian photographs.

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A.S. Byatt

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The Aga Khan Prize for Fiction
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Lise Goett

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for her three poems
appearing in issue 133.

Vijay Seshadri

has been awarded
The B.F. Conners Prize for Poetry
for his poem "Lifeline"
appearing in this issue.

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Errata

Our feature, "A Semester with Allen Ginsberg," which appeared in issue 135 of *The Paris Review*, contained a number of errors. Mr. Ginsberg was sent galleys long before publication, but due in part to illness and in part to travel that took him out of the country, the galleys were never corrected.

- On page 215, Gregory Corso's middle name should read Nunzio, not Annuncia.
- On page 223, the lines from Gregory Corso's "Sea Chanty" should read: "My mother hates the sea / my sea especially / I warned her not to / it was all I could do / . . . Upon the shore I found a strange / yet beautiful food / I asked the sea if I could eat it / and the sea said I could . . ."
- On page 233, "Paramita Sutra" should read "Prajna-paramita Sutra".
- On page 234, "dots of the Brooklyn waterfront" should read "docks of the Brooklyn waterfront."
- On page 236, the lines from "Pull My Daisy" should read: "Pull my daisy / tip my cup / all my doors are open"
- On page 238, the sentence "Ignore other parts of the mind." should read "Don't ignore other parts of the mind."
- On page 252, the phrase "post-coitus triste" was mis-transcribed as "postcoitus treatise."
- On page 253, the fragment of Reznikoff's poem #48 should read: "A pot of fish was boiling on the stove. Sometimes the water bubbled over and hissed. The smell of fish filled the cellar."
- On page 255, Louis Zukofsky's couplet should read: "Nothing is better for being eternal / nor so white as the white that dies of a day."

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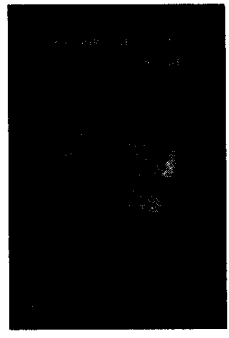

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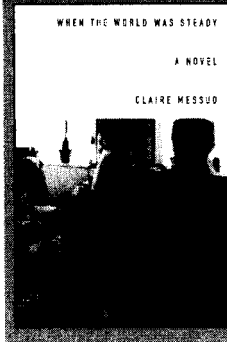

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